My Bones Have Found A Place

by Blackrising

Summary

A glimmer of understanding lit up Abby's eyes. "So you think they'd exchange Finn's life for an Omega to mate."
Clarke shook her head. "No, but their Commander might."

-OR-

Clarke sees a chance to save Finn from execution and cement their alliance with the Grounders. Her life against the safety of her people, laid in the Commander's hands.

[NOTE: CANCELLED, but a last chapter detailing how the story would have continued and ended has been added.]

Notes

Rated explicit for future chapters. If you've stumbled upon this and are asking yourself 'Omegaverse? What an odd and wonderful thing might this be?', then I encourage you to go
where I went, back when first started obsessing over it. You can read this fanfic without knowing the exact specifics of Omegaverse, no problem, but it's a good place to start if you want more info.
Chapter 1

Once Clarke had finished laying out her plan - dry and clinical and as reasonable as humanly possible -, a heavy silence descended upon the room.

And then all hell broke loose.

"Have you lost your mind?"

"You can't be serious."

"Have you thought this through?"

Thin fingers snaked around her arm and pulled her away from the table, through the door and out into the hallway. Abby's expression was very neutral, but she smelled positively furious. Clarke repressed the natural urge to lower her head. She'd accepted her mother's guidance all her life, had accepted the 'natural order' of Omega children bending to their Alpha parent just as readily, but that was no longer an option.

"Care to tell me what made you think this plan was anything short of ludicrous?"

Clarke pulled her arm away, expression hardening.

"It's our only chance. If we want to keep Finn safe, going through the Commander is the best opportunity to do it."

"I know your intentions are good, but you can't possibly think this is the only way," Abby hissed, baring her teeth.

"We already tried every possibility there is." Clarke's strained voice echoed off the metal walls. "They won't give in. They want Finn, or the alliance is dead before it can even begin. You and I both know that we can't fight against the Grounders and the Mountain Men both. We need this alliance."

Something in Abby's expression shifted and Clarke knew what she was going to say even before she opened her mouth. She reared back. "We are not giving them Finn, Mom."

Abby had the good grace to look mildly guilty. "Of course not. But there has to be a way to keep both sides happy without you sacrificing yourself."

"Finn took 18 of their people. If we're unwilling to give them the retribution they asked for, we'll have to think of something better."

The Doctor frowned, crossing her arms in front of her chest and tapping her foot on the floor. "And that something has to be you?"

"It's not about me. It's about what I am. An Omega."

Omegas were exceedingly rare. Even back on the Ark, there had only ever been one or two per generation. And even so, they were considered dangerous to the population, with their fertility and ability to drive Alphas crazy with nothing but their scent.

Omegas were a threat and they were dealt with accordingly. Like her father. One simple mistake had been enough for Jaha to condemn him to death and for Clarke to end up here.
"That's the one thing they don't have. According to Lincoln, there hasn't been an Omega in more than ten years. Seems like the radiation did something to their genes that causes their Omegas to die shortly after birth."

A glimmer of understanding lit up Abby's eyes. "So you think they'd exchange Finn's life for an Omega to mate."

Clarke shook her head. "No, but their Commander might. She seemed reasonable and I know she wants what's best for her people."

Abby ran a hand through her hair, shoulders stiffening. "It doesn't have to be you, Clarke. We could-"

"What, send in someone else? There is only one other unclaimed Omega in this camp, Mom. Do you really want to risk sending in Murphy? He could undo everything we've achieved with a single wrong word."

Her mother bared her teeth, growling and Clarke flinched, jerking backwards. A tense silence spread between them, and then Abby let out a heavy breath.

"What if the Commander doesn't want to take the deal?" she asked, the dark rings beneath her eyes appearing almost violet in the low light.

Clarke looked down at the bend of her elbow. The barely noticeable puncture holes were covered by her jacket, but she felt them as acutely as the day she'd gotten that first shot. The Ark had made sure to give both her and Murphy another dose of suppressants before they got sent down so neither of them would have to deal with heats until the others could follow them - or until they all ended up dead, whichever came first.

It was hard to keep track of time down here, but Clarke guessed she had another month or so until the suppressants would wear off on their own. She couldn't wait around for that.

"I won't give her a choice."

Bellamy was waiting for her when she stepped from the oppressive metal cocoon of the Ark into the fresh morning air. It had taken all night and most of the morning, but she'd finally convinced the Council that her plan was the best course of action.

"So they're okay with it?"

Clarke nodded. 'Okay' might have been a bit of an exaggeration, but they hadn't been able to refute her arguments. It had been Kane who'd eventually taken her side and lent her the support she'd needed to be taken serious. It was crap, but without an Alpha's backing, an Omega's opinion wasn't worth much. Especially when Clarke's mother, her 'responsible Alpha' - she sneered at the thought and wondered when it had started to bother her so much - was against it.

Bellamy uncrossed his arms and straightened from his slouched position against the wall, falling into step beside her. "Are you okay with it?"

She contemplated the question for a minute as they walked along the fence. The two of them had had their differences in the beginning - still had, sometimes, but Bellamy had proven himself to be trustworthy and fiercely protective of the people he cared about.
She'd come to respect his leadership and he'd come to treat her like he would a fellow Alpha. Clarke trusted him.

"Whether I like it or not doesn't matter. At least this way, being an Omega will have some use."

"Hey," he said, stopping her with a hand on her shoulder. "You know an Omega is not all you are, right? Our people listen to you, they follow you. And none of them gives a single damn about what you are."

Clarke attempted a reassuring smile, but it didn't reach past her mouth - it never did, these days. "Which is exactly why I need to do this. They count on me and I'm going to get them out of that mountain, no matter what it takes."

"We don't know what will happen to you over there."

The Omega rubbed at her eyes, tiredness beginning to seep in. There would be no time for sleep until Abby had given her the shot that would counteract her suppressants. And afterwards, she'd be too busy looking for an Alpha to knot her to feel the exhaustion in her bones.

"Whatever happens, I know you'll save our people. They follow you, too."

Bellamy chuckled. "Yeah, but I'm an Alpha. Everything about me tells them to. They listen to you because you earned their trust, not because you're dominant."

They stood in silence for a few moments, looking out over the forest and the sprawling tents of the Grounder's temporary camp.

"Are you going to tell Finn?"

Clarke glanced back towards the Ark. They'd had to lock Finn up for the time being, at least until they could be sure he was in his right mind. Clarke hadn't talked to him since then. She couldn't. Everytime she looked at him, she saw the eighteen people he'd killed lying at his feet, the blood and dirt on his face, the gun clutched in his tight grip. Sometimes she'd catch a glimpse of the boy he'd been, the boy who'd brought her a pencil and who'd seen the beauty in this place even when she couldn't. Sometimes she still saw the boy she loved. And that, above all, scared her.

"No," Clarke shook her head. "If everything goes as planned, I'll be claimed by this time tomorrow. It won't matter then."

Whatever feelings she'd had - still had - would be irrelevant. Lexa would knot her repeatedly over the course of her heat and Clarke would accept it. Crave it, even. Mating and the very real possibility of pregnancy would hopefully be enough to convince the Commander to take responsibility. It was as dastard a plan as Clarke had ever devised, and she didn't like to think of how it would ruin not just her life, but drastic times required drastic measures.

Bellamy frowned, opening his mouth to retort, but the look in her eyes shut him up. Instead, he just nodded.

Clarke took the gesture of acceptance for what it was and turned her back on him to go in search of her mother. There was a lot left to plan before tonight.

Clarke pulled the jacket tighter around her shoulders, a drop of sweat running down her neck. It was
her mother's, meant to mask the scent of her heat until it was convenient. It was a little too small, but Beta smell was too bland and the scent of another Alpha - one that wasn't related to her - would have affected her too much. She couldn't afford to get riled up right away.

She felt hot underneath the thick fabric of two jackets, but she didn't dare take them off. They were too close to the Grounders camp to risk it.

The forest was dark and silent, the buzzing of insects and the occasional shout from the camp the only sounds piercing the quiet.

And then Murphy sighed, loudly. "So, you just about ready to get fucked or what?"

"Oh my god, Murphy, shut up," Raven hissed from her place opposite him, sitting with her back against the rough bark of a tree.

"What? I don't wanna sit here all fucking night waiting for the Princess to start dripping."

Raven's grip on her gun tightened. "Complain all you want, but do it quietly. We're here so Clarke doesn't get caught at the wrong time."

Murphy snorted, gesturing towards Clarke. "She's in heat. She won't care."

"Shut up, Murphy." Clarke gritted her teeth. She regretted taking Murphy now, but it had been a necessary evil. As a fellow Omega, he wasn't affected by her scent and smelled far stronger than a Beta like Raven. They stood a better chance of keeping her heat hidden with him than without him.

She quickly took stock of her body's responses. Sweat was beading on her forehead, her heart was beating irregularly and the wetness between her legs was starting to become uncomfortable. The low pulse in her belly was distracting, but not yet unmanageable.

"It won't be much longer," she said to Raven, who nodded curtly in response and went back to peering through the bushes towards the lights of camp.

Murphy sighed again, even louder this time.

"I swear to god, if you sigh one more time I'll take this gun and shove it up your ass," Raven growled without looking back at him.

"Hey, Princess, how does it feel to know you're about to sell yourself into slavery?"

Raven muttered quiet expletives to herself.

"I'm not selling myself," Clarke said, hand fisting into her mother's jacket.

He raised his hands in mock placation. "I don't judge. If you wanna be some Grounder's breeding bitch, be my gue-"

His sentence was abruptly cut off by Raven's hand covering his mouth. "Shh, hear that?"

Clarke strained to hear anything over the blood rushing through her ears.

There it was. Quiet whistling.

"That's the signal," Raven said, removing her hand from a huffy Murphy. "Are you ready?"

Clarke took a deep breath, shifting uncomfortably when her nipples rubbed against the rough fabric
of her shirt. "Yeah. Let's go."

The area around the Commander's tent was blessedly deserted.

"Seems our distraction worked," Raven muttered, nudging Clarke along with a hand on her back.

"Great," Murphy drawled, keeping his gun cocked just in case. "Now get the Princess in there before they come back."

"Will you be okay?"

Clarke jerked her head in affirmation, shoulders shaking. She had only ever experienced one heat in her life, her first, but she didn't recall it being that bad. What had started out as the occasional shiver running down her sweat-soaked back had evolved into body-wracking convulsions that shook her to her very core.

She could smell the Alphas in camp, even though none of them was nearby. She could also smell the Commander, just beyond the thin fabric of her tent. The wetness between her legs spread as she breathed in deeply, running down her legs and soaking her underwear.

"Are you sure?" Raven eyed her worriedly and Clarke tried to nod again, but another involuntary jolt made the task impossible. She felt like an addict craving her next shot and she wished Raven would just get out of her way so she could go in there and find some relief.

Murphy took one look at her face and pulled Raven out of the way, ignoring the glare the Mechanic gave him in return. "Let it go, Reyes."

Clarke hadn't thought she'd ever be grateful for Murphy's presence, but they exchanged a rare look of understanding and then he and Raven disappeared back into the underbrush. Clarke knew they'd stand watch in case things went south, even though at the moment she couldn't conceive how this could end in anything but her bent over and knotted.

She shook her head violently, attempting to get her rampant thoughts back under control. Now that Raven and Murphy weren't here to provide a cover for her scent, she'd have to keep control of the situation. The Commander wouldn't - shouldn't - be able to.

There was no sense in waiting any longer. The other scents covering her might have muddled the Commander's sense of smell from a distance, but not when Clarke was standing right outside. Lexa knew she was there.

She pushed past the tent flap and allowed it to close behind her, trapping her - trapping them both - inside.

Clarke had expected to find the Commander pressing a hand to her nose or, if she was lucky, already feverish and incapable of rational thought. She wasn't. Instead, Lexa stood at the far end of the tent, shoulders taut and chin held high. For all intents and purposes, she looked like she always did. Proud and unaffected, green eyes cool beneath her war paint. For a split-second, Clarke worried that they might have miscalculated, that they had somehow misread the bland scent of a Beta for that of an Alpha.

She needn't have worried. The musky smell that tickled her nose and made her stomach quiver was unmistakable.
It was undeniably dominant.

It made Clarke want to fall to her knees and submit, to offer herself up to the Alpha in whatever way she desired.

"I see you have found a way to bypass my guards."

Clarke blinked, unreasonably startled by the calm statement. "Yes."

Unlike Lexa's, her voice was rough and shaky. She didn't trust herself to say anything more.

"You're in heat."

The Commander walked closer, fingers idly stroking the dagger at her hip. It would be a threatening gesture under normal circumstances and Clarke suppressed a quiet gasp, barely remembering to nod.

"Why have you come here, Clarke of the Sky People?"

Clarke didn't answer. She couldn't. Fire burned through her veins and her head was stuffed with cotton. She knew she'd come here with a plan, but she couldn't formulate the words to explain it even if she'd wanted to.

Instead, she followed her instincts. She fumbled for the buttons of her mother's jacket with trembling fingers and shrugged it off her shoulders. An almost tangible cloud of pent-up pheromones released into the air. Clarke could feel the moment Lexa became aware of the change, could see the almost imperceptible widening of her pupils, could smell the Alpha's own spike in pheromones.

This time, Clarke didn't hold back the moan pushing at the back of her throat.

It took several tries until she'd managed to get a hold of her second jacket's zipper and free herself of the garment. Her shirt came off far easier and she didn't even attempt to unclasp her bra, simply pushing it up and over her head.

Clarke stood topless in front of the Commander, hard nipples straining in the cool evening air, and awaited the Alpha's next move.

Lexa's eyebrows twitched in surprise, the grip on her dagger tightening. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Clarke's voice cracked and she didn't hide it. The inherent submissiveness that came with being an Omega could be used to her advantage. She needed the Commander distracted, long enough for Lexa to knot her, and there was no better way to do so than to appeal to her natural dominance. Alphas wanted to conquer and Clarke would give her that.

Lexa's jaw tensed as her gaze flickered from Clarke's eyes to her neck and over her torso before stubbornly fixating her forehead. "If that is what you came for, I'm afraid you will find no relief here."

Clarke covered the distance between them in slow strides, hips swaying alluringly, and came to a stop only when there was nothing but a few inches separating her from the Alpha. From this close, she could smell nothing else but the Commander's musky, slightly tangy scent. It was sweat and pheromones and something like rain and grass and Clarke couldn't remember if she'd ever smelled anything better.

Shoulders shaking and loins aching, face flushed and sweaty, Clarke reached out to lay her hands on
the Commander's hips and pulled their bodies together, thighs slotting against thighs and bellies pressing together. Her nipples scraped over the scratchy fabric of Lexa's coat and she could feel an unmistakable buldge pressing into the apex of her thighs. Clarke whimpered, trying to resist the urge to rub herself against the Commander.

Lexa swallowed, but otherwise showed no sign of relenting. "Clarke, step away."

Clarke breathed in shakily at the order, hearing the commanding tone rather than the words themselves. This wasn't going well.

She knew Lexa was affected. She could see it in the red of her cheeks, the sweat dripping down her neck, her wide dark eyes, could feel it in the stiffening of her shoulders. But it wasn't enough.

Clarke had trusted that the Commander would not be in the right state of mind to refuse. That she wouldn't want to. She had counted on her own influence as an Omega to make sure that whatever reservations Lexa had, they wouldn't matter. The desire to claim her should have outweighed common sense by now.

Instead Clarke herself was on the brink of begging the Commander to take her or at least find someone else who would and Lexa just stood there.

In a last attempt at gaining control of the situation, Clarke did as the Commander asked. She stepped back, in spite of what her body was telling her, and watched the muscles in Lexa's shoulders clench, her arms twitching as if to grab her.

Alphas were hunters and Omegas were prey and no hunter could resist the temptation of the kill.

Clarke walked backwards until the back of her knees hit the edge of the large, fur-covered bed in one corner of the tent, Lexa's eyes following her every step. She quickly undid her pants and slipped them off, sacrificing elegance in favour of speed.

There was a quiet but unmistakable growl as Clarke sat on the bed and spread her legs and she knew Lexa could see the wetness soaking through her underwear and running down her thighs. Clarke could smell her own arousal clearly in the heated air of the tent and it had to be a hundred times worse for Lexa, who had started shaking.

"Fine," she said, just loud enough for the Commander to hear the tremor in her voice. "It's your choice."

Even as she said it, she leaned back on one hand, the other one snaking down her stomach and into her panties, lightly stroking herself. It wouldn't help with the heat, but it would hopefully rile up the Commander and give her the last push she needed.

"Stop that," Lexa growled warningly and Clarke's hips jumped, momentarily pushing her own hand harder against her. She pressed her teeth together, willing herself to keep a cool head, just a little longer.

"It's your choice," she repeated, knowing very well that it was far from the truth. Their bodies were working against them. Always. "But if you're not willing to give me what I need, I'll have to look for someone else who is."

The Commander's brows drew into a tight frown, a muscle in her jaw jumping nervously. Clarke bit down on her lower lip, fingers moving faster.
"You can go, or send me away, and then every Alpha in this camp will be clamoring to get to me. They'll kill each other for the chance to knot an Omega. Right now, your presence is the only thing stopping them from tearing down this tent and you know it."

Clarke was playing highly unfair. Lexa's stormy expression had darkened to downright dangerous, a thin vein pulsing in her forehead. Whether out of anger or arousal, Clarke did not know, and it didn't matter. For Alphas, one wasn't so different from the other.

"It won't matter to me. I will take whatever they can give me and like it." She shuddered in pleasure, even as the last smidgens of her rational mind recoiled at the thought. "So it's up to you, Commander," she whispered, hips moving steadily against the pressure of her own hand. "You can let one of your lesser Alphas fuck me, knot me, breed me...or you can do it yourself."

There was a choked growl and suddenly Clarke's world turned upside down as she was flung across the bed, her back pressing into the soft furs underneath her and her arms restrained above her head.

Lexa's face was inches from her own, teeth bared in a snarl, and her knees dug into the bedding beneath Clarke's thighs.

Clarke groaned, trying to angle her hips up and against the Commander's, but her position didn't allow her to reach high enough.

"Lexa," she pleaded, straining against the hold. What she wanted - what she needed - was so close. She could clearly see the shape of the Commander's erection through the fabric of her pants, the frantic movement of Lexa's eyes and the sweat soaking her collar.

Lexa's grip on her wrists tightened, the sharp flash of pain only serving to heighten the warm pulse in her gut, and then she let go, shaky hand hovering over the skin of the Omega's throat.

Clarke leaned up to press her lips to the underside of Lexa's jaw, breathing in deeply. The scent was stronger here, around the scent glands of the outer ear, and Clarke's fingers instinctively went to the Commander's hips, scrabbling for something to hold onto.

"Clarke," Lexa pressed out between her teeth, the fingers of her right hand sinking into the soft flesh of Clarke's thigh and her torso rocking forward as if to kiss her. She caught herself mere millimetres from Clarke's lips, their heavy breaths intermingling until Clarke thought she might starve or die of thirst if she couldn't feel those lips on hers.

Clarke's hands slid along the fabric of the Commander's shirt to the waistband of her pants and clawed at the button, willing it to come undone despite the tremors shaking her. When it finally did, she whimpered against the tiny inch of space between their lips and slipped into the cramped confines to wrap her fingers around Lexa's cock. The burning hot flesh pulsed and jumped in her grip and Lexa flinched, eyes screwing shut and a strangled moan tumbling from her opened lips.

And then she pulled back.

Clarke was finally getting what she wanted and the Commander pulled back. She blinked, arching her back without a second thought, anything to get more of the stimulation she craved, but there was nothing she could do as Lexa once again kept her hands firmly above her head.

"Lexa, please." The sob came unbidden, unexpected. The first prickle of tears rose in her throat and she squeezed her eyes shut. A wave of desperation washed over her and it hurt, it hurt to want something so desperately and be denied.

"I'm sorry, but I cannot let this happen."
Before Clarke had consciously registered the words, rope wrapped around her wrists and loped around the headboard. She was stuck.

"No, Lexa, no, please," she chanted, jerking against her bindings. The pain fanning out from her wrists got lost in the throes of heat. The Commander had already climbed off her, shakily closing her pants and robbing her of all contact.

"You will hurt yourself if you keep struggling." Lexa raised her chin, expression distant and hard. She would look like nothing had happened if it weren't for the sweat glistening on her skin and the erection straining against the front of her pants.

"Calm down."

Clarke obeyed. There was nothing else she could do. She was in no state to try and fight an Alpha's dominance. Her hormones made very sure that she didn't want to.

Her hips twitched, thighs clamping together and toes curling at the effort of staying still as she watched Lexa leave the tent. With every step the Commander took, Clarke felt the pangs in her stomach worsen, the ache in her loins growing sharper, but she didn't dare move.

Only when the tent flap closed behind the Commander and her shouted orders had faded did Clarke whine quietly and let her head fall back against the furs, finally allowing the tears to fall.

Clarke thought she'd go crazy. She didn't know how long she lay there, unable to provide relief for herself or find an Alpha to take care of her. She didn't know how long she sobbed and thrashed against her bindings, tormented by Lexa's residual scent clinging to the bedding and the scents of all the Alphas in the camp.

Now and again she thought she'd heard voices, arguing, the sound of a scuffle just outside, but it never lasted long enough to make it past the haze in her mind. All she knew was that she was hot and slick and there was no relief in sight. There was another scent there, at some point, something faintly familiar. She was too weak to resist the warm liquid being poured into her mouth and greedily drank it down. The darkness that followed was a welcome relief.
Chapter Summary

In which Clarke does damage control and neither Indra nor Abby are happy about any of this.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Clarke woke up - really woke up - she felt stiff and cramped. Her muscles ached worse than they'd ever had, even after they'd just landed on Earth and she'd suddenly found herself confronted with hard physical labour.

As she tried to stretch her overexerted limbs, she blearily noted that her still-naked body was covered with a rough cotton blanket. Going by smell, it had come from the Ark.

Clarke rotated her wrists, wincing. Somebody must have freed her at some point, but the rope had left nasty red abrasions where her skin had rubbed against the rough material. She didn't consciously remember tearing at the restraints, but she supposed she must have.

"The princess has awaken from her slumber." Clarke barely managed to catch the wad of clothes being thrown her way, blinking at the figure hovering in the corner. "Finally."

Murphy got to his feet, stuffing his hands in the pockets of his pants. Clarke recognized his scent as the one she'd smelled earlier - sometime in the last two days, it must have been, since her heat had calmed. It made sense now, the familiarity. Omegas were primed to be caretakers, to smell calm and comforting, especially to other Omegas. That Murphy was a dick didn't much matter in this case.

"How long have you been here?" Clarke asked, barely audible over the rasp in her voice.

He watched her warily, like he expected her to get angry at his presence. Under normal circumstances, she might have. On the list of people she could deal with seeing her like this, Murphy was very far down, but right now she simply lacked the energy to do more than silently wait for an answer.

"About a day," he finally said, shrugging. "They figured I was least likely to be a danger to you - or the other way 'round. Ironic, huh?"

Clarke didn't bother with an answer. A headache was beginning to settle behind her eyes.

"You know, a 'thank you' wouldn't kill you. I've been sitting here for hours in case you decided to run off and get yourself into a gangbang."

"Don't push it, Murphy," she hissed, regretting the action as soon as a flash of pain stabbed through her frontal lobe. "I didn't ask for this."

Murphy snorted derisively. "From what I heard, you were asking for it. Pretty loudly, in fact. Pity the Grounder bitch wasn't actually interested."
Humiliation crawled up Clarke's spine, her teeth grinding together. She wasn't in the mood to be reminded of how her plan had failed in the most spectacular of fashions, least of all by Murphy.

"Just get out."

"As your Highness demands," he snarled, stomping out of the tent with pulled-up shoulders. "Next time one of your damn plans blows up in your face, don't call me to pick up the pieces."

Clarke waited until his scent had disappeared before gingerly inching off the mattress and slipping into the fresh underwear, shirt and pants. They weren't new, tears and holes eating away at the fabric, but they were relatively clean. It was a novelty, to be able to slide into clothes that didn't reek of sweat and dirt and blood. There was only so much you could do with water, herbs and one set of increasingly rancid clothes.

She would have liked nothing more than a shower, or at least take a dip in one of the lakes, but there were more pressing matters to consider. Like Finn.

Clarke 's plan had failed. She had failed. She'd given her best, made a downright fool of herself, and all she'd achieved was two days of near-crazed, unfulfilled lust and a knot of humiliation coiling in her gut.

For all she knew, Finn was already dead.

A familiar scent nearing the tent made her flinch, a bout of residual arousal tightening in her belly. It lasted only a moment and when the Commander entered the tent, flanked by Índra and a large Grounder Clarke didn't recognize, she greeted her with a raised chin and taut shoulders.

There was a short moment in which they halted just inside the entrance, nostrils quivering as they scented the air for proof that the last remains of Clarke's heat had really gone. No doubt the evidence of her pheromones still lingered, she could tell by the way Lexa blinked once, very slowly, but they seemed satisfied enough by what they found.

Índra was the first to step forward, brows drawn together into a stormy frown and torso tilted forward threateningly. It wasn't nearly as effective as it would have been coming from an Alpha - lacking the pheromones to back it up - but Clarke didn't doubt that the woman hadn't become Chief by luck alone.

"You are very lucky to be alive, Sky Girl," the General spit out. "A less merciful Alpha wouldn't have stood for such blatant manipulation."

"Índra, nou."

The dark-skinned woman's jaw worked tirelessly even as she obeyed the Commander's order and backed off. Clarke took a deep breath. There was no point in denying anything, but there might be a way to control damage yet.

"Manipulation or not, my offer was - is - a sensible one. One that will benefit us both."

Índra whirled around, rage playing across her features, but Clarke pointedly kept her gaze fixed on Lexa.

"This is ridiculous." She turned to the Commander, gripping the sword hilt at her waist tightly. "Em ste spicha, Heda. Nou teik em pon kli yu."
"Indra." A slender hand rose into the air, swiftly cutting off whatever the General might have said. "Bants osir."

Clarke had no way of knowing what the words meant, but if Indra's expression was anything to go by, she was not pleased. The dark-skinned woman scowled deeply before shaking her head and disappearing through the tent flap.

"Yu seintaim, Gustus."

Only the barest twitch betrayed the second Grounder's surprise as he, too, took his leave, though not before sending Clarke a cold, calculating look that worried her far more than Indra's vocal resentment.

The tension in the air only thickened further once they were alone. It had been easy to ignore her unease while she'd had to deal with Indra's accusations and Gustus' cool glances, but now that they stood in front of each other, Clarke couldn't help but remember that they'd been far closer just two days ago.

Humiliation began to seep into her bones again, a sensation she steadfastly ignored. Now was not the time to question herself or her actions.

Lexa herself was impossible to read.

Whether she was angry at what had happened, smug about leaving Clarke in a compromising position or simply disinterested, the dark smudges of warpaint surrounding her eyes hid her true thoughts like a black veil.

The silence stretched into something like eternity before the Commander finally raised her arm to gesture to a table in the corner, where a pitcher rested on the smooth wooden surface.

"Drink. You are dehydrated."

She was. Her mouth felt dusty and rough, like the morning after one too many cups of Monty's Moonshine. Lexa waited patiently as Clarke poured herself a glass of water and sipped, forcing herself to go slow and steady.

"I will have a meal brought to you, should you be hungry," the Commander continued, arms held behind her back and pressed tightly against her body. The very image of in-control Alpha confidence.

Clarke ignored her own undoubtedly messy appearance and shook her head. "That's not necessary. I'd rather we talk now."

"I presume your misguided display two days ago was meant to be an offer for a union between you and me?"

Clarke did not react to the obvious dig. "It was. I couldn't risk you turning me down."

The obvious *well you failed* remained blessedly unspoken by either of them. Lexa started pacing the room, though not in that nervous way most people did. No, she paced in the way a predator would, all tense muscle and hazardous intent. Clarke's stomach constricted and the Commander sent her a sharp look. It was to be expected, of course. Suppressants didn't just stop heats. They stopped most of an Omega's sex drive, keeping their hormones under a tight lid so none of them would accidentally tempt an Alpha.
It had always been that way. Omegas forced to suffer a complete reversal of their hormonal balance so Alphas weren't put into an uncomfortable position. Clarke had never paid it any mind, never known differently. Until now.

Now she'd have to get used to a life without suppressants. And her body wouldn't let her forget that it craved an Alpha.

"You already have your alliance. Why risk it all to attempt a mating bond you must have known might fail?"

Clarke averted her eyes for a fleeting moment. "The alliance would have broken sooner or later. Someone would have made a mistake and we'd have another war on our hands. We can't afford to lose anymore people."

The Commander's eyes narrowed, as if searching for an opening she knew to be there but hadn't been able to pinpoint yet. She found it, hidden behind the resolution in Clarke's eyes, and stopped her pacing.

"You wish to protect the one who murdered my people. You believe we won't kill one of our own."

So Finn was alive. Clarke almost breathed a sigh of relief.

"I - all of my people - will be yours. You will lose one death, but gain two hundred allies. Soldiers, medics, engineers," Clarke insisted.

"My people demand justice. They already doubt the wisdom of an alliance with the Sky People, they will not stand for letting this crime go unpunished."

"So convince them!"

"It is not that easy, Clarke," Lexa snarled, taking a step forward before catching herself and continuing, calmly, "Accepting a Sky Person as my mate would lead to unnecessary complications. Denying them their righteous retribution would lead to my death. And then there is nothing stopping the twelve tribes from burning your camp to the ground."

She shook her head with an air of finality. "Your offer is not worth it."

"Wait," Clarke scrambled for something - anything - to turn the argument in her favour. "You're forgetting something."

"Oh?"

The Commander didn't back away as Clarke stepped in front of her. Their discussion was as much a fight as any other battle. And it would decide over life and death as much as any war could.

Clarke's blue eyes bore into green ones.

"Me. You'll get me."

Only the twitch of an eyebrow suggested anything but boredom on Lexa's part. "Personal gain will not affect my decision."

"It's not about personal gain. It's about the future of your people." Clarke was gratified to see a hint of hesitation reflected back at her and ploughed ahead. "We can give you something you can never achieve yourself: Healthy children. Healthy Omega children."
The skin between Lexa's brows crinkled in contemplation - or displeasure, Clarke couldn't be sure. "You would trade yourself - your body - for the life of a murderer?"

"No, I trade myself for all of my people. For lasting peace."

The Commander grew silent - far too silent - as she mulled it over in her head and Clarke watched anxiously as the other woman began pacing again. And then Lexa stopped abruptly.

"Very well, you will have your union," she began, chilly eyes coming to rest on Clarke. "And you will have the murderer's life."

Clarke nodded, swallowing at the knot forming in her throat. It was relief and dread both that pressed against her ribcage. How does it feel to know you're selling yourself into slavery?

"Thank you, Commander."

Lexa nodded sharply before shrugging out of her jacket with an easy roll of her shoulders. Clarke stopped short at the gesture, apprehension and nerves curling around her throat and eyes drawn to the smooth, tanned skin of the other woman's arms. She blinked when the Commander merely held the piece of clothing out to her with an expectant look.

"Wear this," Lexa said with a nod towards the fabric in her outstretched hand. "It will make the next few weeks easier on both of us."

"Why?" Clarke raised an eyebrow but accepted the garment, and when she slid into the sleeves and the warm cloth settled around her shoulders in a cloud of Lexa's scent, she knew.

"Because the scent will make them think you are mine. Smelling too much like an unclaimed Omega will raise suspicions."

Clarke frowned. She'd assumed the Commander would want to mate and breed her as soon as possible. Her heat was over, but for all intents and purposes, she was now Lexa's to do with as she pleased.

"So claim me, then."

Lexa stiffened, eyes darting around the tent. "That will not be necessary."

Clarke didn't argue. If the Commander wanted to hold off for a little while longer, she'd gladly take those last few days of freedom. She'd be mated and pregnant soon enough.

"I need to get back to my camp and talk to my people about our arrangement," she rasped eventually. For all her plan-making and preparation, telling her friends and family she was about to get married to someone she barely knew was a different prospect altogether.

"My guards will accompany you," Lexa said, already pulling the tent flap aside. She hesitated in the open doorway, looking back at Clarke.

"The bonding ceremony will take place tomorrow at sundown. Be ready then."

The walk back to camp was a silent one, least of all because Indra was far too busy attempting to burn Clarke with nothing more than her eyes to accept any attempt at small talk.
Clarke didn't mind. She was glad to have the time to herself, to contemplate the events of the last days and to prepare herself for the things she would have to do for the sake of her people.

Like accepting to be mated by someone she didn't know, let alone love. Like agreeing to bear an Alpha's children. She'd had the word 'breeder' flung at her a few times, both back on the Ark and after having been sent down with the Hundred. It was a stupid insult. Born from the minds of people who were too stupid or too ignorant to look past biology.

It was ironic how that was now exactly what she would become, all for the sake of her people - some of whom had been the ones to try and hurt her with the word in the first place.

"The Commander is making a mistake, trusting you," Indra snarled, apparently done with judging her silently and from afar. "You and your kind bring nothing but trouble."

Clarke didn't look back at the dark-skinned woman, eyes trained on the dark shape of the Ark resting against the sinking sun. "All we want is an end to this war so nobody else has to die."

Indra shook her head, one corner of her mouth pulled up in disgust. "Are you really that naive, girl, or do you simply not think before opening your mouth? Your actions will bring ruin to everyone, my kind and yours."

Clarke sharply turned her head to look at the Chief, then, trying to discern whether the comment was a slight or a warning. Or both. "After tomorrow, there will be only one kind. Ours."

"If you truly believe that, you're not as smart as the Commander likes to believe."

"Lexa seems to think the plan is worthwhile."

Surprisingly, Indra hesitated. "The Commander is young," she said eventually, looking up at the approaching gates of camp. "Experience has not yet taught her that some risks are not worth taking. Confronted with a pretty face or not."

Clarke halted a few paces from the gate while they waited for the guards to open it. This was a conversation she'd rather not be overheard.

"Are you saying she would put personal feelings ahead of her people?"

"Absolutely not," Indra huffed, as if the very thought was ridiculous. "She would never put her people in jeopardy."

She trailed off, crossing her arms in front of her chest. The shouted greetings and nervous mumblings that welcomed them once the gate had opened almost drowned out Indra's next words.

"Herself, however, she might not hold in such high regards."

The Arkers crowded around her when she entered, chattering and curious like a flock of birds. Not many of them knew the true purpose of her visit to the Grounders camp two days ago, but the air of expectation and apprehension had been impossible to dismiss. All they knew was that Clarke had been gone for two days and that Finn was still alive - and that they were, too.

The Betas eagerly dug for news, for reassurances Clarke couldn't quite give them, not yet. The Alphas in camp, on the other hand, kept themselves at a safe distance. They shuffled around the
They smelled Clarke for the unclaimed Omega that she was, but most likely weren't sure how to connect it to the Alpha scent hanging around her. Her body smelled inviting, everything else told them in very clear terms to keep their hands off. If it was any other Alpha, it might not have been much of a deterrent. Alphas thrived on their pack dynamics, on determining who had power and who didn't, on fighting for the right to lay claim to whoever they pleased, and as far as status went, the Commander undoubtedly outshined them.

Lexa had been right - keeping their scents mixed would make things easier until they were truly mated. Ruffled Alpha instincts or not.

The crowd eventually parted when the slim form of the Chancellor hurried out of the medical tent, hands raised in a familiar assertive gesture. That was something only an Alpha could do and something an Omega could never hope to achieve. Commanding a crowd with nothing but glare, a flick of one's wrist and a veil of pheromones. All Clarke had were words and more words and just the right amount of tenacity.

"Let her breathe," Abby ordered, tapping her foot impatiently until the crowd had dispersed. She took one look at Clarke - tired and messy - and jerked her head towards the medical tent. "Come on, let's get you cleaned up."

Clarke felt like protesting, felt like insisting that they talk to the others now and get everything underway, but the sweat and grime on her body was uncomfortable and she just really wanted to feel human again.

Abby led her to the tent and carefully closed the flap behind them to keep the rest of the world out, at least for the moment. She silently gathered a few rags and a bucket of clean water - sterilised, for cleaning wounds - and gestured for Clarke to sit down on the med bed. Her eyes flitted over her daughter's face, neck and collarbones, carefully cataloguing every little scrape and bruise and reconciling them with the wounds Clarke had suffered before her encounter with the Commander. She sighed in relief when there was nothing to be found.

"Do you need me to take care of anything?" Abby asked, staring intently into Clarke's eyes. "Bite marks? Scratches?" She hesitated and continued in the same soft voice she used to calm her patients. "Do you need me to bring you a morning-after pill?"

Clarke began to shake her head, then stopped, and rolled up the sleeves of the Commander's jacket, revealing the scrapes around her wrists. The skin around her mother's eyes and mouth stretched, hardened into cool displeasure.

"She tied you up?" Despite the stressed tone, her hands were steady as she dabbed the wet rag over the superficial wounds. "Raven told us that they fetched the Omega boy-"

"Murphy."

"That they fetched Mr. Murphy to watch over you, but none of us thought she'd treat you like this. Marcus certainly seems to be quite the fan."

The last words were terse and Clarke figured her mother still hadn't forgiven Kane for taking her side. The Doctor finished up quickly, covering Clarke's wrists with iodine and wrapping them up tightly.

"I realize they don't have any Omegas, but an Alpha should realize that it's not right to treat their
"partner this way." She grimaced at the unfamiliar word. Neither of them had expected Clarke to be bound to anyone so soon.

"She didn't," Clarke argued quickly. "She didn't knot me."

She didn't want her mother to think less of Lexa for something she hadn't done, both because it would put a strain on the alliance and because Lexa had been nothing if not reasonable the whole time they'd known each other.

Abby stopped short. "Your scent says otherwise."

Clarke slipped her jacket down her arms, momentarily breathing easier, clearer, without the Alpha's scent hovering about her. "It's Lexa's jacket."

Her mother closed her eyes, concentrating on what her nose was telling her. "It's a good disguise," she conceded. "Though it won't fool anyone for long. Not if they start looking closer."

"It doesn't have to. Just until she's claimed me."

"The Commander has agreed to the union?" Abby asked, frowning. As expected, she didn't seem too happy about it, but Clarke was beyond taking her mother's feelings into account. They all did what they had to do. "Even without mating you?"

Clarke nodded. "She agreed to exchange Finn's life for our cooperation."

"And you."

Abby had a way of seeing through people. Maybe it was the years she'd spent working as a doctor, maybe it was natural aptitude, but she'd always been able to see the things Clarke would rather keep hidden. Fear, apprehension, guilt, every burden Clarke had been carrying on her shoulders since landing on Earth, her mother saw them. Perhaps she didn't understand them - how could she, if she'd never been in Clarke's place, never made the decisions she'd had to make - but she saw them in the exhausted lines beneath Clarke's eyes and the sunken slopes of her mouth.

"Yeah, and me," Clarke acknowledged tiredly. "They need healthy Omega children to keep the population alive."

Abby cupped her cheek, brushing an errant strand of curly hair out of her eyes. "You don't have to do this, Clarke. We'll find another way to save Finn. The alliance can work without this."

Clarke sighed, squeezing her eyes shut and resting her head on her mother's shoulder. Her scent surrounded her, warm and protective. She thought of her father, of the way his long arms had enveloped her whenever she'd been sad or afraid or lonely. He'd been soft and loving, patient and kind in a way her mother had never been. The perfect caretaker. The perfect Omega.

And then he'd made a mistake and now he was gone. She shook her head, pushing away from her mother and swallowing down the tears pricking at the back of her eyes. "The alliance can work. But what if it doesn't? There are too many uncertainties, too many mistakes either side could make."

The balance between their people was delicate. A single push could bring the whole tower down and then where would they be? Right back at the start, caught between death and damnation.

This union wouldn't change the way the Grounders viewed them, it wouldn't change their rocky
history, but it would lend their alliance strength. It would connect them beyond a common enemy.

Clarke was simply the catalyst.

Abby was quiet for a few long moments, watching Clarke with sad and much too knowing eyes, before reaching into her pocket and pulling out a small orange container and pressing it into Clarke's hand.

"Birth control. The last we have. One per day once you're in heat."

Clarke stared down at the pack of small white pills. Minors had always gotten shots rather than pills - it was a safety measure, in case they were too young or too stupid to understand how important it was. Omegas were all but infertile outside of their heat, but being knotted during one, especially if it happened repeatedly, all but guaranteed pregnancy.

"Why?"

She knew why. To avoid children, if only for so long.

The little pills rattled inside the case as she shook it lightly. Four, maybe five at most. It might get her through two heats if she was careful.

"You're an Omega. You'll get pregnant. Far sooner than you'd like," Abby muttered, dunking the rag in her hand into the water and handing it to Clarke. "These will buy you some time."

Clarke turned the wet rag over in her hands. "Maybe enough that I can still change my mind, you mean."

There was a hardness to her mother's eyes she rarely displayed outside her position as Chancellor. "Yes. If it comes to that, I don't want you to be tied down by a child you had no choice in having."

She closed Clarke's fingers around the cylindrical container. "Please, just keep them."

Clarke was left sitting on the cot, contemplating the orange plastic case in her palm.

Chapter End Notes

Trigedaslang (Note: This is probably horribly inaccurate)

"Indra, nou." = "Indra, no."
"Em ste spicha, Heda. Nou teik em pon kli yu." = "She's a liar, Commander. Don't let her fool you."
"Bants osir." = "Leave us."
"Yu seintaim, Gustus." = "You too, Gustus."
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Finn finds out.

"Clarke!"

Clarke slowed her walk so Raven could catch up to her, accepting the hand on her upper arm. The Mechanic looked her over, forehead creasing like she wasn't sure what to make of her. She'd been there with Murphy - standing watch in front of the Commander's tent - and she had to know that Clarke's plan had failed.

"How- How did it go?"

Raven wasn't asking about Clarke's well-being.

"Finn is safe. The Commander has agreed to spare him," Clarke said and watched Raven's shoulders slump in relief, the perpetual frown on her face lifting, maybe for the first time since...everything had happened. A part of Clarke felt guilty for being involved in putting that frown there in the first place, another part of her couldn't help but blame Finn. For not waiting, for not telling her, for making her believe that everything could be alright down here.

"She what?"

Clarke jumped at the voice behind her, hands clenching into fists for a moment. Finn appeared next to them, like a ghost, and Clarke saw nothing but empty eyes and blood on his face and she wasn't ready. She couldn't listen to him, couldn't see him, not yet.

"Clarke, what happened? The Grounders in front of the gate are gone and they let me out, but nobody will tell me anything."

He ran a hand through his hair. Just like Clarke had done that day in the bunker, just like she'd wanted to do and couldn't when he'd almost died, like she couldn't when he'd told her he loved her.

Raven looked between them and Clarke knew she understood, probably better than Clarke herself did, how much had changed. Where there used to be love, there was now reluctance and hesitation, questions that couldn't be answered - or maybe shouldn't.

"I'll leave you two to talk," Raven stated, dark eyes reflecting what all of them knew. Her place was somewhere else now.

She left with a reassuring squeeze to Finn's shoulder and Clarke's throat clogged with sadness and guilt, because shouldn't it be her? Shouldn't she be the one who offered comfort and forgiveness to the man who'd killed because of her? For her.

"Please, what's going on?" Finn repeated, brows lowering sadly when Clarke averted her eyes. A confrontation had been inevitable, she'd known that. She'd known she'd have to deal with this, with him, sooner or later. She'd simply hoped it wouldn't be when she was on the tail end of her heat and was about to sell herself in exchange for his safety.
Finn had been so comforting, once upon a time. Just a nice Beta boy who couldn't smell that she was an Omega, who didn't care about what others may see in her. He didn't care about designations. He didn't muscle his way through opposition like an Alpha and he didn't cower like an Omega - he didn't even fight tooth and nail for recognition like Jasper had always done or like Clarke was forced to do. He'd just been nice. He'd been there.

And now that boy she'd grown to love was gone, replaced with the man standing before her - one with sad eyes, tear-stained cheeks and blood seeping into his skin.

"I made a deal with the Commander." Clarke's voice was strong, far more sure than she'd anticipated. It threw him.

"I thought she'd already said no. That there would be no alliance until I was dead."

"I offered her something better."

Finn caught her gaze and Clarke forced herself to allow it, letting him search for whatever answers he was looking for. His eyes were the same warm brown they'd always been and she wished they weren't. She wished she could see some sort of darkness in them, some kind of sign of what he'd done. She wondered if her own eyes reflected any of the burdens she carried.

"What? What did you offer her?"

Clarke considered lying. At least until after the union. At least until Lexa had made an official claim. At least until she couldn't back out anymore.

"Me," she rasped and could see the exact moment he'd registered the meaning of the word, when his shoulders stiffened and his hands balled into fists. "I offered myself."

He grabbed her by the arm then and pulled her to a secluded corner. It wasn't an unkind move and his grip was coaxing rather than forceful, but Clarke's skin burned underneath Lexa's jacket where he touched her and she ripped her arm away. Hurt oozed from his slumped frame and Clarke wished she could soothe it. She wished that she wanted to.

"You shouldn't have done that. You shouldn't have - not for me." His gaze turned inward, pupils wide and glassy. "You should have let them kill me."

His throat bobbed and Clarke wasn't sure whether she was relieved at the regret in his expression. It should have made forgetting so much easier. But it didn't.

"Of course I'm not going to let them kill you. None of us would."

It was a lie they both knew well. Finn was a Beta and Betas were expendable. What was the life of one teenager in exchange for the lives of everyone else?

"Clarke..." His fingers came to rest against her cheek and Clarke breathed out, getting lost in the familiarity of the touch. "Let's run away. Both of us."

"What?" She jerked back.

"We'll just go," he explained, throwing his arm out in a wide arc. "We'll find someplace else, someplace safe, until this whole thing blows over. They can't kill me or take you if they can't find us."

"And where would we go?" Clarke asked incredulously, shaking her head. "We wouldn't survive
winter without supplies. Without suppressants, I'd have to make it through my heats in the wilds. Every Alpha in the vicinity would sniff us out."

"Earth is big. We'd find somewhere isolated. Clarke, we could make it."

He tried to reach for her again, but Clarke pushed his hands away. "It's not that easy, Finn."

"It could be! You just have to trust me."

Trust. It was a word that sounded foreign in Clarke's head. Like an old coin rattling through her brain. She could count the people she trusted with her life on one hand. Even shorter was the list of people she'd trust to make the right choices. And the number grew smaller everyday.

"We're at war," Clarke whispered sharply. "Trust is a luxury I can't afford."

Finn cocked his head, looking at her like he'd never seen her before. The expression was gone as fast as it had appeared, but something had shifted. Something neither of them could drag back into place.

"Just think about it," he pleaded. "We'll go away and you won't have to go through with the deal."

Clarke's fingers cramped around the hem of her jacket. "And what happens to our friends in Mount Weather? We just leave them to die?"

"Of course not, but it's not up to us. The Chancellor, everyone, is here now. They'll get them out." His palm was warm and reassuring where it came to rest over hers. "I care about you. And I want to know you're safe."

Clarke wondered whether his priorities had always been that skewed, whether she simply hadn't noticed it. Whether she'd been the same way.

When he'd been exploring the woods, had he wasted any thought to the others working at camp, exhausting themselves to the point of unconsciousness to build a home for all of them? When he'd found the bunker, had he considered sharing the supplies, even for a second?

She pulled her hands away from his.

"I know your loyalties lie with the people you love, but so do mine. And I want to know that our people - all of our people - are safe."

She left him standing alone, the heartache in his warm brown eyes burning into her back.

The preparations were taken care of quickly but meticulously. Her mother and Raven had taken charge of it and Clarke was grateful for one thing she didn't have to worry about. It was hard enough being followed around by Finn's sad gaze and Indra's perpetual moodiness. (She'd lost her to Octavia at some point, strangely enough. Clarke didn't know what they were talking about, but there was a lot of growling and hissing involved and she'd decided she didn't need to know anyway as long as it kept the Chief out of her way.)

Before Clarke could so much as form a clear thought or take a quick nap, she'd been washed, dressed and groomed to perfection - or as close to perfection as possible in the current situation.

She'd need two of her people to represent her. If she was a Grounder, it would be her First and a trusted friend. As it was, Abby and Kane were the natural first choice, one being related to her and
one presenting a position of leadership. It wasn't part of their tradition, but Clarke decided she'd have a maid of honour anyway.

Not for sentimental reasons, of course. Most of her people - most of the soldiers - would have to stay behind to guard the camp and she couldn't afford to go into this unprotected. If the Grounders were as averse to a merger with them as Lexa had said, she'd need all the protection she could get. In this case, Bellamy.

"You want me to do what?"

"I want you to come with me to the ceremony and make sure none of the guests try to stop the union permanently."

"No, you said you want me to be your bridesmaid." Bellamy's forehead crinkled in consternation and the corners of Clarke's mouth twitched. She'd been hesitant about talking to him now that she was off her suppressants. The last thing she'd wanted was her body to see him as an Alpha rather than the friend he was, but she needn't have worried. She was more aware of his scent, and she supposed it was the same way for him, but they'd managed to scrape past that with a companionable nod and a friendly shoulder bump.

"Just in name. We have to explain your presence somehow."

Bellamy fidgeted. "Couldn't we explain it in a way that doesn't involve me wearing an ugly dress and dancing with the groom's father?"

"There will be no dress." Clarke frowned. "Or a groom. I'm not even sure Lexa has a father."

"My issue isn't with the dress. I just want it to be a pretty dress."

Clarke snorted. "Ask Octavia. I'm sure she'd be delighted to stuff you into one."

"I'll have you know I'm perfectly capable of sewing it myself", he grinned. "If you'd told me sooner you'd get married tomorrow, I could have whipped you up a dress like you wouldn't believe. Frills, lace, bows, the whole nine yards."

At the mention of 'marriage', Clarke stiffened. It wasn't a marriage, not really. Not the kind they'd performed and celebrated back on the Ark. She'd heard about mating ceremonies that took place once an Alpha and an Omega had soul-bonded, but it wasn't even that.

Soul-bonded. A fancy word for the chemical process that altered the participant's hormones to want each other - and only each other - for the rest of their life. She used to think it was romantic, in a sort of unattainable way. An Omega needed to be knotted and bred for a soul-bond to take form naturally and the Ark would never have allowed it, no matter how rare it was for it to happen on the first try.

Now that there was a very real possibility she'd have to enter into such a bond to preserve the alliance, the thought of it seemed much less charming. Your body didn't give you a choice in who you desired and the soul-bond made sure you'd be chained to a single person for the rest of your life. Whether you approved of it or not.

"I'm not getting married," Clarke said, eyes trained on the Grounders Camp in the distance. "I'm making a deal. Whether the Commander and I end up bonding or not, it won't be more than that."

"What if you do? End up bonded?" Bellamy asked quietly. "You'll be stuck."

Clarke swallowed, gripping the plastic case of pills in her pocket tightly. "So will she. In any case,
soul-bonds are rare. It might never happen."

All the mated Alpha-Omega pairs she knew - even her parents - had been soul-bonded artificially. A simple shot with a built-in contraceptive that triggered the Omega's heat and made both partners more receptive to each other. It wasn't a gesture of goodwill or a romantic notion. It was a way to neuter Omegas, nothing more.

Bellamy contemplated her sadly, but didn't press the topic. "Are you gonna take anyone else with you?"

"Just my Mom, Kane and you. It's a risk, but I don't think the Grounders would react well to an army marching up to their gates."

He cleared his throat. "What about Murphy?"

"What about him?" Clarke asked sharply, raising an eyebrow.

"I hate to say it, but it might be a good idea to take him." Bellamy turned his head to look at the gate where Murphy was standing watch, machine gun in hand and fingers scratching idly at his ear.
"Asshole or not, he could be useful."

Clarke frowned in Murphy's direction, gears turning. "The Grounders probably wouldn't object to another Omega's presence," she mused.

"And the Alphas might be too distracted by two Omegas in their midst to remember they wanted to kill us just yesterday."

Clarke shook her head. "It's too dangerous. I don't trust him to have my back if things go south."

Bellamy rubbed a hand across his mouth and shrugged. "Can't blame you, but - and I can't believe I'm saying this - maybe you should give him another shot."

"I did," she reminded him coldly. "And he killed two people for it."

"True," Bellamy nodded. "But he also saved my life. And he's been trying to help, in his own way. He stayed with you during your heat, you know."

Clarke remembered. She hadn't been in a right state of mind, but she remembered him giving her water or tea, probably laced with something to knock her out for the duration of her heat. He probably hadn't needed to watch her or bring her a clean change of clothes, either.

"Fine," she acquiesced. "He can come. But if he steps one foot out of line, I'm going to hold him responsible."

"I'll keep an eye on him. It might help his attitude if we give him something to do."

Clarke grimaced. "I hope you're right. Could you speak to the others before we leave? We know Grounder tactics better than any of the soldiers and I want them to keep an eye out during the ceremony, just in case."

"Yeah, I'll ask Monroe to take care of it. She'll round them up."

"Good. Tell her to make sure the soldiers don't waste ammo and that the electrical fence will not keep them out if they decide to attack."

"I will. Relax, princess."
She rubbed a hand across her aching eyes. "I wish I could."

Bellamy sighed. "We all do."

A delegation of Grounders was waiting for her the next day, just as the sun began its slow descent towards the horizon.

Clarke's night had been restless, filled with thoughts on whether they had prepared too much or not enough, whether everything would go smoothly. If she'd been in any way capable of viewing the situation with humour, she might have called it 'wedding jitters'. As it was, she was simply exhausted to her bones and wished it was over and done with already.

Indra awaited her at the front, Octavia by her side, and Clarke wasn't familiar with Grounder customs, but she understood the significance behind it. At least one of them had managed the jump from enemy to ally. It wasn't as complicated for her anymore.

Octavia was an Omega, but she had Lincoln. She was claimed - happily so - and no one could deny it, not when she reeked of him constantly. Unclaimed Omegas like Clarke and Murphy were prey to be hunted and taken, but Octavia had managed to rise from that into the ranks of those Omegas that had an Alpha mate to call their own - and she'd been lucky enough to do it of her own free will.

Clarke had the same advantages, so long as the Grounders thought Lexa had already claimed her. Knotting was the conventional method to lay a scent mark on your current partner, though some couples preferred something more visible, like a bite.

Clarke stepped past the gates to meet them and was relieved to find Lexa had had enough foresight to send mostly Betas, though she pulled the Grounder's jacket tighter around her anyways, like it would shield her from the disapproving and, in some cases, downright hostile glances.

Her mother and Kane, both cleaned up as best as they could and wearing their most intact clothes, stood behind her - one with a smile and one with a heavy frown.

Bellamy stepped up beside her, unarmed except for the knife she knew he carried in his boot, and a sharp murmur rose amongst the Grounders. A few lurched forward as if to attack and Clarke forced herself to not react. Octavia listened to something Indra hissed into her ear and hurried towards them, pushing against Bellamy's chest with the palm of her hand and urging him back.

"You can't be near her," she whispered, glancing between her brother and the Grounders. "It's not exactly usual for an Omega bride-to-be to have an unrelated Alpha at her side."

"How am I supposed to keep an eye on things if I have to keep away?"

Clarke studied the Grounders, their narrowed eyes and suspicious glances, and shook her head. "Stay in the background. Try to blend in."

Bellamy grunted, but fell back until he walked apart from the rest of the group. The only one who'd decided to stand away even further was Murphy - which may have been a good idea, considering the glances some of the Alpha Grounders sent him. Distraction was one thing, leaving Murphy to deal with a bunch of horny Alphas another.
Octavia leaned closer. "They're not happy their Commander is getting bonded to a Sky Person. If I was you, I'd try and keep any suspicion off me for the time being. Bringing Bellamy is enough cause for mistrust as it is."

Octavia waited for her nod before rejoining Indra and Clarke spared a last glance at Camp Jaha. She thought she saw Finn's sad eyes watching her from afar, and then they set off.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

And finally - the union ceremony.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The ceremony was a simple affair. There were no decorations, no festive mood like one might expect from a traditional wedding. A long table - or more accurately, a lot of small tables - had been placed in front of the Commander's tent. The Grounders were already seated, leaving the wooden chairs in the middle free.

Lexa was standing in front, waiting to bid her welcome. As Clarke approached, the Grounders grew silent, wild chatter ceasing and leaving a hostile silence in its wake. She didn't give them the satisfaction of appearing unsure, keeping her chin held high until she stood in front of the Commander.

"Clarke of the Sky People," Lexa greeted her and gave a small nod.

"Lexa."

Clarke's gaze flitted over the Commander's form. The pieces of armour that usually adorned her body were absent and her coat looked clean and well-kept. She wore no war-paint either and it startled Clarke, somehow. She looked so much younger with her face scrubbed clean, surely no more than a few years older than Clarke herself.

Lexa didn't give her the same once-over, choosing instead to look over Clarke's shoulder towards the others. She stiffened, just barely, and Clarke could see her nostrils flare at the same time as a wave of Alpha scent washed over her. It wasn't arousal that had made Lexa bristle, not like it had three days ago, but displeasure, and Clarke didn't need to follow her gaze to know what she was looking at - Bellamy was far back, but his scent was strong and she didn't doubt that the Commander could smell an Alpha in his prime on her turf from a mile off.

"He's here for my protection," she explained shortly. "I trust him."

Lexa's eyes dragged away from him slowly, boring into hers, and Clarke willed her body to not react. Abby and Kane fidgeted behind her and from the corners of her eyes, she saw Murphy inching closer to them into the protective cover of their scent. The Grounders were watching them with bated breath, no doubt waiting for the escalation they craved. She doubted they could hear their conversation, but that was the thing about Alphas - if they didn't like something, their pheromones made sure that everyone knew.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Clarke," Lexa said simply with one last imploring look and as her shoulders relaxed, so did the tense atmosphere. She gestured towards the free seats. "Sit. The ceremony can begin at once."

Clarke followed Lexa towards the two chairs in the centre. The two seats next to Clarke were
reserved for her mother and Kane, who awkwardly perched on the edge of the crudely crafted furniture, while Murphy had to make do with standing behind them. She ignored the dirty looks he sent her way. Bellamy was nowhere to be found, as per her instructions. He'd take position somewhere with a good view of the proceedings in case he needed to step in.

The setup on Lexa's side was quite similar, except one of the seats to her right was empty. The other one was taken up by the large Grounder Clarke had seen before - Gustus his name was if she recalled correctly.

He was staring at her, though not quite in the way the other Grounders were. As displeased as they seemed to be, Clarke could tell they were also curious. Most of them might have never seen or smelled an Omega before, nevermind three of them. They were lucky that Murphy was still on suppressants and that Clarke's heat had just ended - even so, the Alphas around them shuffled their feet anxiously, fingers twitching, and she didn't want to imagine how they would react when confronted with an Omega in full-blown heat.

No, Gustus looked at her with open distrust, like he was just waiting for the whole thing to blow up and knew he'd be the one who'd have to pick up the pieces.

*And he may not be so wrong about that,* Clarke thought as she watched Murphy jerk back from an Alpha that had gotten a little too attentive.

Her gaze was drawn back to the empty chair. It seemed out of place, like a single barren spot in a grassy field.

"Are we waiting for someone?"

Lexa didn't acknowledge the question, though Clarke was sure she'd heard her. When she finally did answer, her voice betrayed nothing. "It was to be Anya's place."

Clarke remembered it vividly. The smell of dirt and metal, the sharp ring of gunfire, the sight of a body hitting the hard ground. Last words breathed into the sudden stillness. She didn't apologize, didn't express her condolences for Lexa's loss. It wasn't her place, not when it had been her people who'd shot Anya down.

And so she merely nodded and looked away, pretending she didn't see the Commander's fingers tracing the braid wrapped around her wrist.

Gustus rose and the remaining bouts of idle talk died away. He commanded respect, especially for a simple Beta.

"*Teik osir stot au!*"

"It's customary to start with a short speech from both parties," Lexa explained quietly. "Usually it's your First who will speak for you. Since that is possible for neither of us, you may give the task to whoever you wish."

Kane rose without prompting and cleared his throat - despite Abby's harsh glare.

"If I may?"

Lexa tilted her head towards Clarke, a silent question. Clarke gestured for Kane to go ahead.

"Our beginning has not been an easy one," he started, hands clasped behind his back. "Full of misgivings and hate. And while we are still far from understanding one another, I hope that this day
of togetherness marks the first of many."

Clarke opened her mouth to thank him for his speech, expecting him to sit back down, until he turned his eyes to her and smiled.

"Marriage is a sacred and ever-lasting tradition for the people of the Ark. Alphas, Betas, Omegas, we are all looking for one thing - love."

Someone - someone who sounded suspiciously like Murphy - snickered in the background.

"We live in a harsh world and if there is one thing I wish for you," he nodded seriously at both of them, "It is that this marriage will grant you peace and contentment. May it bring you comfort even in the darkest of times."

Clarke gritted her teeth, looking anywhere but at the too-bright grin aimed at her. The Commander didn't fare much better, polite interest frozen on her stony face.

"It is not your actions here today that will bind you together as mates," he continued, seemingly unaware of the rising tension. "But the strength of your commitment and the life you will now lead together. May you find it in yourself to let love grow and-"

Abby cut him off with a swift and brutal pull at his jacket and a hissed "That's enough, Marcus", leaving him no choice but to fall back into his seat. Kane looked suitably indignant at having his speech interrupted, but stayed quiet. Clarke breathed out a sigh of relief and was sure she saw a hint of gratitude flicker over Lexa's face.

In an attempt to breach the awkwardness of the moment, the Commander nodded at Gustus and he stood up anew. "Heda," he said respectfully before turning to Clarke. "Skayon."

There was no discernable difference in the way he spoke to her, yet Clarke felt the disapproval drip from his lips. If it wasn't clear before, it certainly was now - this one wasn't happy with the union.

Subtly, Clarke looked around for Bellamy. She found his curly head of hair hidden behind one of the tents. He nodded.

"Osir ste hir gon uf. Osir ste hir gon Maungedakru," Gustus continued, looking over the assembled Grounders. "Gon emo uf ste osir."

He raised his cup and the audience errupted into cheers. Clarke looked to Lexa for any sign of what he might have said, but her face was as closed off as ever, a barely noticable line appearing between her brows.

After that, everything went surprisingly fast. There were no further speeches, no long exchange of vows or promises neither of them meant. Gustus handed them a cup of what Clarke vaguely recognized as something tart and alcoholic - a sort of wine, maybe - and they both drank from it, putting their lips to the exact same spot.

And just like that, they were bonded. By tradition, if not by scent or soul.

There was clapping and half-hearted congratulations, a supportive nod from Kane, a sad look from her mother and Clarke was honestly just relieved that she wasn't forced to drag this out.

After the official part was over, a couple of Grounders brought food and drink to the tables - meat, actual bread and more wine. It wasn't fancy, but there was plenty and none of them could remember the last time they'd been able to eat their fill.
Clarke wanted to enjoy it - the smell alone made her mouth water and her stomach grumble - but a part of her couldn't avoid thoughts of her people. Those in Mount Weather who were possibly being bled to death right this instant and those stuck back at camp who would go to bed hungry. The few bites she took turned to ash in her mouth.

Murphy had no such problems, grabbing as much food from the table as he could and stuffing his face until his cheeks bulged. It was very unlike an Omega and he drew attention. Gustus was watching him with raised eyebrows from his place besides Lexa and Clarke decided it had been a good idea to bring him, if only because his obnoxiousness kept the Grounder's suspicious eyes off her.

Kane and her mother were more hesitant, but they, too, indulged in the feast with lowered heads. Even Bellamy was chewing on a chunk of bread from his vantage point away from the centre of celebrations.

Lexa glanced at the untouched food on her plate.

"A hungry stomach cannot wage a war," she muttered so only Clarke would hear. "It will not help your people if you starve."

Her words rang true, yet Clarke hesitated. She thought back to her short time in Mount Weather. She'd felt wrong eating their food then and she felt wrong eating this food now.

"There's more than enough for everyone. If you wish, you may take the left-overs back to your camp. My hunters provide us well."

When Clarke turned her head, the Alpha was staring straight ahead.

"Thank you," she said quietly, breaking the ensuing silence. "My people will appreciate it."

She picked up a piece of bread and put it in her mouth, chewing slowly and carefully. It tasted heavenly, in that way it only could to someone who hadn't eaten in some time, and as Clarke's stomach growled in satisfaction, she finally allowed herself to eat until her belly was full.

Throughout the meal, she watched Lexa from the corners of her eyes. The movements of her jaw were slow and calculated, like she measured every bite before she took it. Her eyes never rested on one spot for long, rather they seemed to take in everything at once, observing Grounders and Arkers alike. Nothing went on without her noticing and analysing it. When someone got too excited, a simple raise of her hand silenced them. A mere glance was enough to make her warriors cower.

It made Clarke's heart beat irrevocably faster and warmed her belly. She felt full and satisfied and blissfully sluggish. That coupled with the scent of Alphas all around her - with the Commander's scent right next to her - caused her inner Omega to be hyper-aware of her needs. One was met, another still needed taking care of. Thanks to the suppressants, her sex drive had never been particularly high. She'd rather spent her time on more useful pursuits, like learning everything she could about medicine from her mother or sharpening her mind by playing chess with Wells.

But now, Lexa's scent did something to her. Alpha scent did something to her and the Commander just so happened to be the most powerful Alpha around. Clarke didn't have to like it to know it was true. Whether she wanted to or not, her body would respond to Lexa.

At the very least, she thought absently, it would make the 'wedding night' more than bearable. It would make being knotted and claimed not so horrible. An inexplicable and unwanted thrill of excitement ran through her at the thought, her pheromones thankfully dimmed by her mother's scent.
next to her and Murphy's own Omega hormones clouding the air.

It was dark by the time Clarke found a chance to excuse herself from the ongoing festivities, vaguely hinting at needing to relieve herself. Gustus cleared his throat, jerking his head to indicate Murphy - who'd stopped eating just long enough to pour as much wine down his throat as humanly possible.

"It would be appropriate to take another Omega with you," Lexa explained indifferently. "There have been cases in the past of Omegas being claimed by another Alpha on their wedding day."

Clarke would have disliked the implication that she might not be capable of fending off advances from other Alphas if Lexa's voice hadn't been devoid of judgement. She obviously didn't much care one way or another.

Murphy rolled his eyes at the flick of her fingers, but followed largely without protest, probably because the flask glued to his lips made it hard to talk.

"You know that's a stupid idea, right?" he said, pushing another piece of meat into his mouth as they weaved through the crowd. "They're already unhappy you brought Bellamy with you at all, but sneaking off to talk to him? You're basically begging them to brand you a slut and lynch you."

"Lexa knows there's nothing going on between me and Bellamy."

Murphy snorted, not bothering to swallow his food before opening his mouth to reply, "Right, like that matters. She's an Alpha. You're hers now and she's not gonna accept you just talking to anyone."

Clarke pulled up her shoulders and walked faster, forcing him to walk a few paces behind her. "She'll have to. I'm no one's possession."

"We're Omegas. By law, we're everybody's possession. First it's our parents, then the closest Alpha relative once they're gone or we get assigned to a fucking caretaker. When we're old enough, we're 'encouraged' to get mated or get sterilized. Why do you think I had to go with you? Because they don't want someone else to make a claim on their Omega." His voice dropped and grew quieter, as if he was talking to himself more than to Clarke. "We'll never be free. We just get to change cages once in awhile."

Clarke didn't know what to say, so she kept quiet.

Bellamy met them in the shadows of a cluster of tents, far enough away from the fires to not be overheard, but not so far as to not have a good view.

"Have you seen anything out of the ordinary?" Clarke asked without preamble, watching the celebrating Grounders. Most of them were too drunk to pose much of a threat at this point, but she knew better than to underestimate them. Impaired or not, every single one of them could still give them a run for their money.

"Nothing we didn't anticipate. They don't trust us. Some probably assume you coerced the Commander into claiming you."

Neither of them missed the irony of the whole thing, considering that had been Clarke's plan in the first place. Murphy snickered quietly. "That didn't work out so well, now did it?"

They ignored him.

"Keep watching, just in case. If anything happens, get Kane and my Mom out of here."
"What about you?"

Clarke shook her head. "I'll probably be in no state to run from anything."

Her and Lexa would be tied before long and it would leave them vulnerable, but if Clarke wanted this union - and this alliance - to be absolutely incontestable, it needed to happen tonight. She couldn't worry about being regarded as prey by everyone who thought they could fight the Commander for an Omega mate.

Bellamy drew his brows together and grabbed her upper arm, ignoring Murphy's fake gagging noises next to them. He didn't tell her that she didn't have to do this and she appreciated the solidarity - it was too late to go back. Clarke patted his hand briefly.

"Don't worry, I'll be fine. If I'm in danger, so is Lexa, and I don't think her bodyguard will let anything happen to her."

"He's even been watching me like I'm a threat," Murphy interjected, shrugging when they both sent him an incredulous look. "What, far as they know I'm just the Omega chaperone. Completely innocent. The guy could probably fold me in half."

"Well, at least he seems to know who to look out for," Bellamy mumbled before turning back to Clarke. "You'll be careful?"

"I will. You too."

Murphy sighed in annoyance. "Great, everybody loves everybody. We're all a big family. Can we go now, before someone sees us and thinks Bellamy is boning us both?"

Bellamy grimaced, though Clarke had to admit Murphy had a point. She'd already been gone too long and she'd rather not risk anyone getting the wrong idea.

"Remember, we can't afford to lose Kane or my Mom," she threw over her shoulder and waited for Bellamy to slip back into the shadows before making her way back to her seat, Murphy in tow.

As she sank back into the chair, Lexa tensed and gave a barely noticable tilt of her head, her nose quivering. And then she shifted abruptly, almost pressing their shoulders together, and Clarke jerked back on instinct at having her personal space so suddenly intruded upon.

"We need to go," Lexa murmured and for a moment Clarke thought it was an expression of desire, that the Alpha in Lexa had unexpectedly taken over, until she looked into the Commander's eyes. They jumped around, from face to face, assessing danger. "You smell like Alpha."

Only then did Clarke realize they were being watched. Some of the Alphas had stopped what they were doing to look at her. They were confused more than anything else, senses dulled by the wine, but they had noticed that she smelled differently. Bellamy had only touched her briefly, but Alpha scent was persistent, and even though he didn't smell all that strong to her, it didn't mean more sensitive noses couldn't pick up on it.

She was still wearing Lexa's jacket, but her scent had been slowly disappearing for a while now. Clarke had been grateful for the break from the constant onslaught of pheromones at first, but now it gave her a distinct disadvantage. Only Lexa's presence so close to her kept her smelling as she should.

It also caused a mist of light-headedness to descend over her mind. She felt the sudden urge to get closer, breathe in more of her, and slowly nodded her head.
"Yeah, let's go."

The Alpha rose, pulling Clarke with her, and raised her hand to get the attention of her warriors. "My mate and I will turn in," she spoke in English, no doubt for the sake of the Arkers. "But I encourage you all to enjoy the rest of the night. Tomorrow, there will be a war to fight."

The loud cheers and catcalls (some things seemed to stay the same, no matter the culture) drowned out the worried words Abby spoke as she squeezed her daughter's hand. Clarke nodded anyway, following Lexa to her tent and away from the warmth of the fires.

Clarke pulled the jacket off her arms with stiff fingers, back turned to Lexa. They hadn't spoken a single word since leaving the banquet and the silence in the tent was oppressive. Almost as oppressive as the heavy Alpha musk thickening the air.

It had been easy the first time. She'd been in heat then and too distracted by her desire to hesitate or doubt herself.

Now it was just her and the woman she'd married for the sake of politics and no scent in the world could detract from the fact that this wasn't happening because she wanted it to.

Clarke breathed in deeply and turned to face the Commander, approaching her with steps that were far surer than she felt. When she came to a stop, she wondered absentmindedly whether Lexa was thinking of their encounter a few days ago as well.

"How are we going to do this?" Clarke asked, swallowing at the way the Commander's pupils dilated in response. Her own body cranked up its pheromone output and whatever Lexa was about to say got lost in her sharp intake of breath.

Clarke watched the pulse in her neck jump. Lexa didn't move, her shoulders stiff and her face passive, so Clarke reached out to grab the lapels of her coat and began sliding it off the Alpha's shoulders.

Before she could get the fabric past Lexa's upper arms, her wrists were seized in a tight grip. It wasn't painful, but the intention was very clear.

"I will not mate you," Lexa stated, and her voice was bright and precise, not at all like she was affected by an Omega's scent so near.

"What?" Clarke blinked, baffled. It didn't make sense. This was their deal. A strong alliance in exchange for Clarke's body, for the Omega children she could give her. Lexa should want to claim her as soon as possible.

The Commander urged her hands to her sides, gently but firmly, and took a step back, shrugging into her coat. "I will not mate you tonight," she repeated. "Or ever. We're bonded for now, but that will not always have to be so. Once we have freed our people from the Mountain Men, we will seperate and you will be free to be with whom you wish. A child would hinder that."

"That is absurd," Clarke insisted. "The alliance will break and we'll be back at the start, trying to kill each other."
"Our people will merge, Clarke. They have already started to do so by celebrating tonight, together. Our union was just the start and soon it will no longer be necessary."

Clarke looked for any hint of uncertainty in Lexa's eyes, but all she saw was cool detachment.

"You know you need Omega children."

"It doesn’t have to be me who gives them to you," the Commander snapped and took a deep breath, closing her eyes for a moment. "I will do my best to ensure the alliance holds. With or without our union."

Clarke shook her head incredulously. By not mating her, not claiming her, Lexa was leaving this all to chance. And maybe that had been her plan all along, Clarke realized darkly. If the alliance held, the Sky People would be forced to integrate. They would merge sooner or later, giving the Grounders the Omegas they needed. If it didn't, or if Lexa saw an opportunity to sacrifice them for the sake of her own people, she wouldn't be held back by Clarke because nothing connected them to each other apart from one inconsequential ceremony. They would have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

She couldn't be sure whether this was Lexa's intention, but if there was ever a time she couldn't afford to take risks, it was this one.

"You'd leave me unclaimed?" she rasped, attempting to close the distance between them and willing her body to increase her pheromone output. She wasn't sure how she was going to seduce an Alpha who'd been able to resist her even in heat, who didn't show a single sign of attraction even now that the Omega who was hers by law all but asked her to.

Not all Omegas smelled the same to every Alpha, just like Clarke did not find every Alpha scent as appealing as the next. Scent did not dictate attraction. If Lexa wasn't attracted to her, she’d have to rely on nothing but the Commander's Alpha instincts.

A hand splayed across her upper chest stopped her short. Lexa looked at her and now she was angry, truly angry, and Clarke hated the way it made her stomach coil in anticipation.

"Make no mistake, Clarke. I have not forgotten your last attempt to manipulate me."

Clarke's jaw clenched and she looked away. "It wasn't personal."

The Commander schooled her features back into indifference and gave a stiff sort of half-shrug. "Be that as it may, I will not be coerced into mating you. It would be a disservice to you and me both."

"And what will we do once your people find out I'm unclaimed?" Clarke's shoulders slumped. Lexa would not be swayed. "What will we do the next time I go into heat? I can't hide in your scent forever."

"For all intents and purposes, you are claimed. Whether I do so physically or not is nobody's concern. They will accept it. As for your next heat," Lexa hesitated, a quick bout of unease crossing her face. "You may deal with it as you see fit. I will not stop you from seeking out another Alpha."

Clarke reared back. "You're telling me to get knotted by someone else? Your people would kill me."

"You'd have to be careful, of course," Lexa frowned, obviously confused at her indignation. "Make sure no one finds out. A bath and a few hours in my presence should largely get rid of the scent."

A part of Clarke was insulted that not only would Lexa refuse to mate her herself, but that she'd
assume Clarke would have to take a lover to get a grip on her urges.

"And what if I get pregnant? Because that's what's going to happen if I let an Alpha knot me while I'm in heat."

"As I said, it is of no consequence whose child you decide to carry. If it happens before there is an opportunity for us to separate, no one has to know it isn't mine."

The look she gave Clarke was intent, asking her to understand. "I'm not trying to make this situation more difficult for you, Clarke. I'm giving you a choice."

Except she wasn't allowed to choose the one solution that would make things easiest on both of them - she wasn't allowed to choose Lexa. And she still couldn't figure out why the Commander would make this so much harder for herself.

"So what now, if we're not gonna have sex?" Clarke asked tiredly, dry humour laced through her voice. It was laughable, almost. She'd spent the last days fretting over this union, dreading what would happen to her once she was an Alpha's mate, and now that Lexa insisted on giving her the freedom to do whatever she liked, it only seemed to bring more problems.

"Now we sleep. We're riding to TonDC tomorrow and you will need the rest. You should take the bed - my scent will rub off on you."

"What about you?"

Lexa was already taking off her coat and threw it to the ground. "It will be suspicious if I don't stay here with you. I have instructed Gustus to make sure nobody comes near this tent for tonight, so we're safe."

The make-shift mattress didn't seem particularly comfortable, but Clarke hadn't had a proper few hours of sleep in too long and was too exhausted to argue over Lexa's choice of sleeping arrangements. She yawned, kicking off her boots, and crawled beneath the furs. She'd been here before, but hadn't been able to appreciate the soft bedding. It was much more comfortable than the thin, scratchy blankets she was used to. Being the Commander certainly seemed to have its perks.

"Goodnight, then," she mumbled awkwardly, pressing her nose into the furs. It was a deceptive feeling brought on by her pheromones, but the smell clinging to the bed made her feel safe.

She was already half-asleep when a quiet 'Sleep well' drifted over from the other side of the tent.

Chapter End Notes

Did you really think I'd let them get it on? Puh-lease.

Trigedaslang (as usual, I winged it):

"Teik osir stot au!" = "Let us begin!"
"Skayon" = "Sky Person"
"Osir ste hir gon uf. Osir ste hir gon Maungedakru." = "We are here because of power. We are here because of the Mountain Men."
"Gon emo uf ste osir." = "Because their power will be ours."
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

In which another plan backfires and danger is brewing.

Chapter Notes

Some of the comments I have gotten on the last chapter made me think that maybe a little disclaimer might be in order.

Disclaimer: Clarke is not an all-knowing narrator. She can not yet tell the difference between Lexa not caring and Lexa pretending not to care. In the same vein, the doubts and suspicions that she has do not have to reflect Lexa's intentions. I repeat: Clarke is not all-knowing. Do not assume that her interpretation of Lexa's cues is always the correct one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was shouting that awoke Clarke the next morning. As she yawned and stretched, she realized that neither Lexa nor her coat was anywhere to be seen. Next to the bed, there was a pitcher of water, a plate of what looked like left-overs and something Clarke assumed to be another one of Lexa's jackets.

She helped herself to the food and drink quickly, cleaning herself up and dressing as best as she was able under the circumstances.

The camp was buzzing in excitement as she stepped out into the low morning light. It couldn't have been later than five o'clock, but the Grounders were wide-awake, showing no signs of the previous night's drinking.

Lexa stood not far from her, shouting orders in Trigedasleng at her warriors as they hurried to prepare for the journey to TonDC.

"Where are Kane and my Mom?" Clarke asked in lieu of a greeting as she joined the Commander. She trusted Bellamy to have kept an eye on things, but you never knew, especially if Murphy was running free. Lexa wasn't startled by her presence and Clarke supposed she'd smelled her coming.

"They took what was left of the food back to your camp. They should be back soon." She glanced at Clarke from the corners of her eyes, noting her raised eyebrow. "They will accompany us to TonDC."

Clarke watched the proceedings silently for a few moments. "Are you sure it's a good idea to take us there? I can't imagine they'll be too happy to see us."

"The one who murdered their families gets to live. They deserve to know."
"Will they be a danger to us?"

Lexa moved to lay her hand on Clarke's back. It was startling, until the Alpha jeked her head towards the people around them and she realized they were being watched by calculating eyes. Subtly, she shifted closer, making their conversation appear much more intimate than it was.

"They know that you're under my protection," Lexa explained. "Attacking my mate means they're attacking me."

"And will that stop them?"

Lexa turned her head slightly, the dark war paint around her eyes seeming to swallow even the light of the sun. "If not, then I will."

Someone shouted Clarke's name and the Commander's hand dropped from her back, establishing a proper distance. Clarke knew why when she spotted her mother and Kane approaching them.

Abby showed Lexa a strained smile before taking Clarke by the elbow and leading her a short distance away, leaving Kane and the Commander to chat amicably.

"How do you feel?" she asked quietly, looking her over in that way only doctors quite managed to do.

Clarke opened her mouth to assure her that nothing had happened, but paused. She couldn't speak freely while they might be overheard.

"I'm fine," she said instead. "Really, Mom, it was fine. Come on now, I think they're just about ready to set off."

She ignored Abby's sceptical look as they rejoined Lexa and Kane. She didn't know what they were talking about, but the barest hint of a smile twirled at the corners of Lexa's mouth.

"Are we good to go?"

The Commander nodded, gesturing for one of her warriors to hand her the reins to a horse. It was a beautiful mare, its chestnut coat glittering in the sun. It was largely devoid of physical malformations except for what appeared to be a short, second snout growing from its first.

"Do you know how to ride?"

The three Arkers shook their head in unison. Lexa addressed Kane and Abby. "You may ride with one of my warriors, if you wish, or walk with the others." She turned to Clarke. "Same goes for you. You may walk or ride with me."

Clarke was inclined to refuse the offer. The prospect of spending hours pressed against an Alpha her body obviously responded to - and strongly - was not very appealing. Not if she wanted to keep a cool head and concentrate on the things that mattered.

On the other hand, the Grounders would expect her to spend time with her mate. She'd seen they way Alphas and Omegas behaved after mating. They were affectionate, loving and usually never far from the other. Traveling on opposite ends of the road would be questionable.

And maybe, she thought with a quick survey of the Commander from beneath her eyelashes, physical contact would weaken Lexa's resolve. Clarke couldn't force her to reconsider her decision not to mate her, but that didn't mean she wouldn't be able to sway her through other means. A
permanent connection was the only way to make sure the Grounders wouldn't turn on them and Clarke was determined to ensure her people's safety any way she could.

The Alpha in the Commander already responded to her, now she only had to convince the woman to do the same.

"I'll ride with you."

Lexa acknowledged her decision with a surprised, but not displeased nod. Abby sent her a look that said 'I hope you know what you're doing' before walking to the back of the quickly forming caravan with Kane at her side.

The Commander waited expectantly, which Clarke interpreted as a request for her to get on first. She looked up at the large animal and swallowed. She'd only ever been on a horse once, back when Lincoln had rescued her and Finn from Anya, and most of that time had been spent unconscious.

She'd never seen an animal before coming down to Earth, especially not such a big one. All she'd had were pictures.

"I'm not sure how to..." she trailed off, indicating the beast's height with one hand. Lexa stepped closer, gesturing to the stirrup. "Put your left foot in here." Clarke did, feeling precariously off-balance.

"Now grab the saddle and try to pull yourself up and over."

Clarke did. Try, that is. She got about halfway up the horse before her leg caught on its flank and she stumbled back, barely keeping herself from landing ass-first in the mud. A few Grounders who'd been watching her snickered.

Lexa didn't. "Try again. You need bigger momentum."

Clarke huffed in frustration and put her boot back into the stirrup, pushing herself up from the ground as hard as she dared. For a moment it looked like it wasn't enough, and then slim hands appeared at her hips to give her the last small nudge she needed, propelling her up and into the seat.

Clarke blinked once she was sure she wouldn't drop down the other side. She felt slightly dizzy from the sudden increase in altitude. At the Commander's prompting, she shifted further towards the front.

Lexa's ascent was much smoother, her long body effortlessly swinging up and finding its place behind Clarke.

The saddle was a tight fit for two people and as Lexa settled, Clarke felt the Commander's hips pressing into her backside. The Alpha cleared her throat and attempted to bring some distance between them - largely to no avail.

"I apologize," Lexa muttered, reaching around Clarke to grip the reins.

Clarke shook her head, looking around in an attempt to ignore Lexa's scent creeping up on her. Gustus sat on a horse just behind them, surveying their surroundings. Kane and her mother were standing side by side, Kane apparently trying to start up a conversation with the Grounder next to him. Far back, at the end of the caravan, Bellamy was holding up a staggering Murphy, who was either half-asleep, still drunk or both.

"Are you ready to go or do you wish to walk after all?" Lexa's voice was startlingly near, a puff of breath drifting over the lobe of her ear.
"I'm ready."

As the caravan set in motion, Clarke was beginning to think that she really really wasn't.

They'd been riding for maybe an hour now and Clarke desperately wanted to be anywhere else. The sun had barely risen and the breeze was pleasantly cool, but the smallness of the saddle kept her pressed close to the body behind her and Lexa's scent mixed with her own where they touched made Clarke's head spin.

They had started at the front of the caravan, but had fallen behind in the last thirty minutes and were now trailing after the rest of the group. Now and then, Gustus glanced over his shoulder to ascertain Lexa's safety, at least when he wasn't busy keeping Murphy - who he'd been forced to pick up and situate across the front of his saddle after the Omega had all but fallen asleep at the side of the road - from sliding off their horse.

Lexa, for her part, had not moved an inch or uttered a single sound the entire time. She was as rigid as a log; Clarke might as well be leaning against a tree.

"We're behind," she mentioned, unnecessarily, hoping to breach the silence between them.

Lexa cleared her throat, but her voice was still low and husky as she answered. "We are."

"Why?"

Clarke could tell that their horse was walking differently, more hesitantly and therefore slower than the rest, but she couldn't see why. It couldn't be the added weight - Gustus and Murphy had no trouble keeping up with the others.

"We are not riding her correctly," the Commander said and attempted to scoot back once again, managing to instil maybe an inch of space between them before the horse's next step pushed her right back into Clarke.

Clarke frowned, not quite sure how one could sit on a horse incorrectly. "Then what are we supposed to do?"

Lexa was silent, her hands tightening around the reins, before she straightened even further and said, "A horse responds to the movement of its riders legs and hips."

Clarke quickly took stock of the human-sized plank at her back and her own, still legs. "And we're not moving."

"We are not."

"Tell me how."

Clarke figured everything was better than the tense silence of the last hour and she was getting stiff - movement sounded good.

"You have to move your hips with the horse, not against it," the Alpha explained quietly. "Follow her gait."

Clarke waited until she thought she'd gotten a sense of the horse's rhythm before attempting to follow it, rocking her hips accordingly. She thought she heard Lexa bite back a sharp hiss as Clarke's backside pressed against her.
The Omega in her crooned and Clarke instinctively shifted closer. Before she could catch herself, Lexa did the same, moving against her with a quiet growl. Clarke felt the beginnings of an erection nudge against her lower back.

The sudden spike in pheromones threw her off the rhythm she had established and their horse came to a stop at the confusing change.

"Maybe you should ride with someone else," Lexa suggested abruptly, her grip on the reins white-knuckled and shaking. She didn't try to move back again, or move at all. "My horse seems to have trouble dealing with two riders."

Clarke knew an excuse when she heard one and while she was tempted to simply get off and let this go, she couldn't pass up an opportunity like this. Her eyes fell on Lexa's tense arms. It was the easiest way for everyone, she reminded herself.

"It would be suspicious for me to ride with someone other than my mate," Clarke insisted. "You can show me how I'm supposed to move."

With only the slightest bit of hesitation, her right hand found Lexa's thigh - pressed against hers - and squeezed. Clarke tried to move again, but Lexa swiftly grabbed her by the hip, holding her still.

"What are you trying to do?" the Commander pressed out between her teeth. Clarke couldn't see her face, but she could imagine the stormy frown above distrustful green eyes.

"You said I could ride with you. That's what I'm trying to do."

Her voice betrayed nothing.

"Don't take me for a fool, Clarke. You believe you can change my mind about claiming you."

Denying it would be an insult to the Commander's intelligence, so Clarke didn't. Lexa's words were said confidently, like Clarke's plan could not possibly hold any merit, but Clarke knew better. Lexa was still hard, her body still tense.

"I'm not doing anything out of the ordinary," she said, demonstratively removing her hand from the Alpha's leg. "If you're so sure you don't want to mate me, something as simple as riding with me shouldn't tempt you."

Clarke issued the challenge casually, wondering whether Lexa would take the bait. She knew the Commander could see it for the trick it was, but Grounders were prideful and self-assured people. Cocky, to put it bluntly.

"Very well," Lexa said cooly and Clarke had no time to wonder whether this was a good thing or not before the Commander suddenly relaxed behind her. What little space Lexa had managed to keep between them vanished as the Alpha's body molded closely against her back, warm and pliable.

"Take the reins, keep them loose."

Clarke did, blinking slowly when long fingers came to rest on her hips. Lexa gave an authoritative click of her tongue, her legs flexing once, and the horse obediently continued its trek.

"Follow my lead," she muttered and Clarke shivered at the breath ghosting over the shell of her ear. And then Lexa began to move, coaxing Clarke's hips into the same comfortable rhythm until they were moving in sync. Everytime Lexa rocked forward, Clarke was pressed into the front of the saddle. Everytime she swayed backwards, Clarke's bottom rubbed against Lexa's groin and her
hardening length.

The Commander's grip on her hips tightened, just a bit, but otherwise she remained cool and detached, never slowing or quickening the pace of their bodies.

Clarke's mouth was wet and tingly, almost like the first signs of heat, and her fingers gripped the reins harder. Lexa's smell was everywhere, quickening the beat of her heart and sending tremors down her spine.

She'd severely underestimated her own body's response to prolonged contact with an Alpha. A compatible Alpha that hadn't claimed her and had no intention of doing so.

She panicked.

"Lexa," she called, attempting to keep her voice even. "I changed my mind. I think I'd rather walk."

Immediately, the Commander took the reins from her and quickened the horse's pace. She shouted something to her bodyguard that Clarke couldn't understand and steered away from the road, into the trees.

When they were far away enough to not be seen, Lexa brought the animal to a halt. She dismounted smoothly and wordlessly offered Clarke her hand.

Clarke took it, descending to the ground much less elegantly. Her thighs ached and her legs trembled, though whether from exhaustion or from the arousal coursing through her she couldn't say. She breathed a little easier, now that Lexa wasn't glued to her back.

The mare immediately trotted over to a little stream gurgling across the forest ground for a water break.

"Are you feeling better?" Lexa asked.

Clarke took a deep breath of clear air, her heartbeat slowing to acceptable levels and the warmth in her center receding.

"Yes."

Lexa regarded her silently, intently. "I said that I would not mate you and I stand by that. Attempting to sway me will help neither of us. We have a war to fight."

Clarke's eyes narrowed as she stepped forward. "Do you think I don't know that? I know what's at stake. I've been there."

"Then why do you focus on changing my decision when you should be focusing on your people?"

"Why do you focus on holding yourself back when simply claiming me would make everything so much easier?"

Lexa clasped her hands behind her back, raising her chin. "Emotions make you hesitate, Clarke," she said, staring at the clear stream with dull eyes. "Our people always have to come first and if I were to mate you, there might come a time in which I would have to choose between my duty to you and any children you might bear and my duty to them. I can't have them doubtful my commitment."

Clarke shook her head at the confusing rhetoric and searched her eyes for the truth, hidden somewhere behind the Commander's mask, but the blinds were firmly shut. Her reasoning was
utterly logical in a way that didn't make much sense at all. It seemed with every day, another reason for her reluctance joined the jumbled fray.

"Emotions don't have to make you weak."

Lexa's gaze turned on her. "You were willing to be mated to me, to bear my children, for a murderer."

"Stop calling him that," Clarke snarled.

A sad smile twitched at the Commander's lips before she tilted her head. "As you wish."

The anger Clarke felt evaporated, drowned out by exhaustion and an oncoming headache and leaving behind a sense of curiosity. "Have you never had anyone like that? Someone you would do almost anything for?"

The Alpha laid a hand on the horse's snout, giving it a gentle stroke. Clarke suspected it was to keep moving as much as anything.

"Costia," Lexa said, and from the sound of her name alone, Clarke knew. "She was mine and so the Ice Nation killed her. Cut off her head and sent it to me, as a warning."

Clarke lowered her head. "I'm sorry to hear that," she said, earnestly. The Commander's reluctance made far more sense, then.

Lexa didn't respond for long moments, swallowing down whatever she might have said, and mounted their horse in one smooth movement. She put out her hand again. "Are you ready for the ride back? You may walk with the others from there."

Clarke nodded and let herself be pulled into the seat, careful not to breach anymore boundaries.

The remainder of the ride was far more comfortable. Clarke took the time to get a status update from Bellamy and take a look at Murphy, who was still snoring away his hangover. How he managed to sleep with the saddle pressing into his stomach and Gustus pulling him up by the back of his jacket when he threatened to slide off, Clarke couldn't fathom, but an unconscious Murphy had always been better than an awake one.

The rest of the time, she walked beside Lexa's horse. They talked. Clarke told Lexa about the Ark, trying to explain the concept to someone who'd never been in space. Lexa told her about Earth, about animals and plants Clarke had only ever seen in books.

If there was one thing Kane had been absolutely right about, it was that they had a lot to learn from each other.

"We're approaching TonDC," Lexa said during a lull in their conversation. Her facial features had relaxed as they spoke, but now they were hard and alert. Green eyes flickered over their surroundings. "Keep your eyes open."

As if sensing the shift in mood, Gustus rode up next to her, wearing the same tense expression.

"Has Indra sent word?"

Clarke raised a quizzical eyebrow and Lexa explained, "I have sent her to assess the situation in TonDC. It's her village, she knows them best."
Gustus began to speak in Trigedasleng, but a sharp look from the Commander caused him to switch into English. "Her Second has brought news of the situation."

Murphy's still form in front of him emitted a loud snore and the bodyguard rolled his eyes, casually readjusting his position until he was breathing evenly again.

"They're furious, Heda. Bringing the Sky People will escalate the situation. They will want them dea-"

"They will have to accept it sooner or later, Gustus," Lexa interrupted him with a shake of her head. "We will deal with it now, before resentment can turn into something worse."

Gustus furrowed his brow, beard twitching as if he wanted to protest. He glared at Clarke, like it was her fault - and maybe it was - before lowering his head in a show of submission. "Yes, Heda."

He fell back, leaving them to their conversation.

"He doesn't agree with our alliance," Clarke stated. "And neither does Indra."

Lexa's gaze remained fixed on the path in front of them. "Gustus has been with me for a long time. He has good instincts, but his priorities don't always align with mine. As for Indra, she's a warrior. She will always do what is best for our people, regardless of whether she agrees with my methods or not."

Something was left unsaid, but Clarke couldn't tell what.

"She thinks my actions will ruin both of our people," she said, remembering their short conversation on the way to Camp Jaha. "You said she knows her village better than you do. Maybe Gustus is right and it would be a mistake to bring us."

"It's my Generals' job to doubt my decisions. Just as it's my job to gauge whether or not their doubt has merit."

The caravan trudged to a slow stop as the metal sign proclaiming their entry into TonDC appeared at the side of the road. Lexa dismounted her horse, handing the reins to one of her warriors.

"Leave your weapons," she ordered and the Arkers reluctantly followed her command. Clarke was about to do the same, when a raised hand stopped her. "Not you. Keep your knife, just in case."

They continued their journey on foot. The mood had rapidly deteriorated as everyone became aware of the unease hanging in the air. Even the horses shuffled along nervously.

The closer they got to TonDC, the quieter it became. Too quiet. As though even the forest itself was holding its breath.

"I don't like this," Bellamy muttered, walking by Clarke's side with his fingers twitching around a gun he didn't have. "I feel like we're being watched."

"Could be scouts," she speculated, glancing up at the trees around them. She wasn't surprised to find no trace of them.

"Could be," he grunted. "Doesn't mean they won't try to kill you."

Clarke looked back, searching for her mother. Abby and Kane were surrounded by a cluster of Grounders - they were safe, for the time being. Whoever wanted to get to them would have to go
through a throng of people first.

Lexa was walking ahead of them, next to Gustus whose fist was closed around the reins of the horse Murphy sat upon, blinking drowsily.

Bellamy's eyes turned towards the forest and his shoulders twitched nervously. Octavia had disappeared back into the trees after delivering Indra's message, no doubt to return to the village as soon as possible.

"Don't worry, she can take of herself. And if they want to take revenge, it'll be on me, not on her."

He nodded, shaking himself. "I know."

Glancing at the Commander's back ahead of them, he leaned closer. "Are you two...good? It's just, you seem kinda distant for a newly-mated couple."

"We're not a couple."

"Well, I know that," he back-pedaled awkwardly. "I just meant-"

"No, I mean, we're not mated either," she said it lowly, so only he would hear.

His eyes widened. "Oh. Huh. Okay."

Bellamy didn't needle further and Clarke appreciated not having to share her sex life with him.

A sudden commotion up ahead made both of their heads snap up.

"How have you survived this long, boy?"

Gustus glared down at a prone Murphy, whose foot had caught in the stirrup - while falling off the horse, presumably.

"Just fine without your grubby hands all over me, old man," Murphy hissed, wiggling away from the hands trying to lift him up. Gustus kneeled, pulling the Omega's foot out of its trap, and shook his head. "You are damn lucky you didn't break your ne-"

"GON!"

The scream caused the Grounders to freeze. Despite not understanding the word, a wave of dread swept up Clarke's neck, like ice-cold rain.

She heard the arrow more than she saw it.

Gustus jerked forward, but he was too far away, hands still wrapped around Murphy's leg. The arrowhead slipped right between the plates of armour, sinking into soft flesh.

And then, with a dull thud, Lexa's body hit the ground.

Chapter End Notes

Cliffhanger aside, this chapter and especially the next one will mark a bit of a turning point in Clarke and Lexa's relationship.
Trigedasleng:

"Gon!" = "Weapon!"
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

In which Quint earns himself a beating, Clarke and Lexa maybe sort of start to understand each other a little better and Gustus is an over-protective mother hen.

Chapter Notes

For those who haven't seen it on tumblr and are interested, this fic now has cover art. Just go to Chapter 1 and you should be able to see it, should you be so inclined. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Quick, get her inside!"

The crowd parted before them as they marched through the gate to TonDC, Clarke at the front with Gustus hot on her heels, an unconscious Lexa resting in his arms.

The Grounders stared at them, obviously not sure whether to follow her order for the sake of their Commander or resist being told what to do by a Sky Person out of spite.

"I said, get her inside," Clarke repeated, cursing the fact that she wasn't an Alpha, that her pheromones made her seem weak and unthreatening, soft. They would listen to an Alpha.

Indra appeared at the front of the crowd and, with one look at the Commander's still form, yelled out something sharp and acidic. Almost immediately, they were directed to a wooden building. Gustus kicked open the door and disappeared inside.

"Mom," Clarke called to a pale Abby. "Can you help her?"

"I have a basic first-aid kit with me, but if the injury is serious, that won't be enough."

"Try anyway."

Abby nodded and moved to enter the building. Two Grounder warriors blocked the door, silently staring at her.

"What are you doing? I'm a doctor, I can treat her."

"You're Skaikru," one of them spat. "All you do is kill. We won't have you touch the Commander."

Clarke's jaw clenched and she stepped up next to her mother, grabbing the first-aid kit from her shoulder.

"I'll do it."

They looked as though they wanted to protest and Clarke growled, putting every ounce of
dominance she could muster into her next words. "Let me through. I have a right to be with my mate."

The words felt alien on her tongue.

One of them leaned down to look her in the eye, smirking when her head jerked away from his Alpha stink. Her instincts told her to fold, to submit, and it took all her willpower to not back down. Abby moved as if to interfere, but Clarke stopped her with subtle shake of her head.

"The Commander is not your mate, little Omega," he snarled, inching uncomfortably close. A drop of sweat ran down her spine. "If anything, you're her pet. She'll grow tired of dealing with you soon enough, Skayon."

Faster than he could blink, Clarke whipped out the knife at her hip and pressed the edge into the soft skin of his neck.

"I said, get out of my way."

He swallowed and bared his teeth in a growl, moving his head closer and his neck harder against the blade. "Try me, breeder."

A sudden yelp erupted from his throat when a boot-clad foot drove into his side and forced him to the ground. Bellamy put the momentarily disoriented warrior into a headlock, struggling to keep him down.

"A little help here?" he groaned and Murphy appeared at his side, sighing as he put his foot down on the Grounder's shoulder, grinding him into the dirt.

"Get your Alpha and this bitch off me," the warrior snarled furiously, glaring daggers at Clarke. "Or I will end you, Omega or no-"

"Shof op, Quint."

Indra came to stand next to Clarke and stared down at the man coldly. "You will show the Commander's mate respect."

He opened his mouth to spit out another insult, but a particularly hard shove from Murphy's boot made him grit his teeth.

"Go on in," Indra nodded at Clarke. "I will deal with this one."

Clarke nodded gratefully, and mouthed a silent 'thanks' to Bellamy - and Murphy, she supposed - before slipping into the hut.

It was quiet inside, except for Lexa's ragged breathing. Clarke was relieved to find her breathing at all.

Gustus had laid her on the small cot in a corner of the room and had already taken off the upper parts of her armour to assess the damage.

"How does it look?" Clarke asked, hurrying to kneel beside the bed and laying two fingers against the sweat-slicked skin of the Commander's neck. Her pulse was weak, but steady.
"The arrow got her in the shoulder," he grumbled. "But it didn't go through."

Clarke tried to think back to Miles, to the arrows that had riddled his body and how they had tried to treat him.

"We'll have to push it out the other side. Help me get her upright, we have to get her clothes off."

Gustus slid an arm beneath Lexa's back and effortlessly heaved her up into a sitting position. As he did, the Alpha emitted a low groan and her eyes blinked open.

Clarke bit back a curse, laying the first-aid kit out next to her and opening it. Being awake was a good sign, but she'd hoped the Commander would stay unconscious for the procedure. It would have made things easier.

"Weron...," the Alpha mumbled, blinking slowly and hissing quietly at the stab of pain in her shoulder.

"Tondisi, Heda."

Clarke prepared a bottle of disinfectant, a clean rag and bandages. "You're lucky. The arrow hit right beneath your clavicle, so there should be no damage to your bones or the rotator cuff, but it's still lodged in your shoulder. I'm going to push it out."

Lexa nodded calmly, although Clarke could see the lines of her face hardening periodically when another wave of pain hit.

"Are you ready?"

Another nod was her only answer and Clarke reached for the arrowshaft when a shadow fell over her.

"Gustus, I can't treat her while you're hovering over me," she said, gritting her teeth. Lexa jerked her head at him and he obeyed the unspoken command with a huff, retreating to a safe distance.

"Here we go," Clarke muttered quietly to herself, gripping the shaft tightly. The muscles in her arms tensed and she pushed the arrow through in one move, ignoring the noise of tearing flesh.

A pained exclamation escaped Lexa's strained throat, but she didn't move until Clarke had broken off the arrowhead and pulled the shaft out with a sickening, squelching sound.

"Good, that's the worst part over and done with."

They'd been lucky. The arrowhead was a simple, smooth one made from metal. Had it been equipped with barbs, not even her mother would have been able to remove it without full access to her tools. The fact that she'd been able to push it the rest of the way without catching on bone was another blessing.

Lexa tried to shrug off her coat and Clarke reached out to help her, wincing as the fabric caught on the edges of the wound. The Alpha's top underneath the coat was soaked in blood, but thankfully did not cover the injury and thus made removing it unnecessary.

Clarke doused the rag in the cleaning alcohol, glancing up at Lexa's face. She was pale, the dark warpaint standing out starkly against the white of her skin, and while her eyes were unfocused, Clarke did not think she was in danger of fainting.
She laid the fingers of her right hand against Lexa's shoulder, holding her steady.

"This is going to hurt," she warned. Gustus scoffed behind her and Lexa merely raised an eyebrow as though her hands weren't shaking where they gripped the bedding. Right, Clarke thought, she'd forgotten. Grounders and their pride.

Gently, Clarke swiped the cloth over the Commander's blood-stained skin, careful to avoid further pain. Lexa held her breath, but stayed silent.

Once the wound had been cleaned, Clarke could finally take stock of the real damage. The muscle tissue was torn, of course, and there was already a nasty, black-ish bruise forming around the entry point, but otherwise it was a relatively minor injury. Certainly not life-threatening if they managed to keep it clean.

Clarke swallowed down her relief. Everything hung on Lexa's cooperation, on her continued assistance. If she died, there would be no alliance. If she died for accepting their deal, Clarke contemplated darkly, it would be another death resting on her shoulders.

"It's not so bad. You'll live."

Lexa jerked her head in understanding, the muscles in her jaw flexing. The injury wouldn't kill her, but she'd lost a lot of blood and she was clearly in pain. Clarke eased onto the cot, her hip pressed into the Commander's thigh. Instantly, Lexa's breathing calmed and the movements of her chest grew less erratic.

An Omega's body was designed to be comforting, especially to the sick and injured or to children. Clarke steadily pumped out soothing pheromones in response to the little gasps of pain that slipped past Lexa's colourless lips. It wasn't something she did consciously, just an instinct she couldn't control, but it had always served her well in her role as medic.

It couldn't dull the pain, but it served to relax the Alpha's stiff form.

As Clake began to carefully wrap the bandages around Lexa's shoulder, she glanced up to find the Commander's eyes on her. She wasn't quite sure how to read them, whether it was gratitude or confusion that glinted in them, but Clarke blinked and looked back towards her hands, not willing to deal with that now.

"There, all done." She tightened the bandages expertly and observed her handy-work. "Keep it clean and it should heal nicely."

"Thank you," Lexa rasped, throat dry. The look Clarke couldn't quite interpret was still in her eyes, but the Alpha turned her attention to the man still hovering in the corner.

"Have we arrested the attacker?"

Gustus growled dangerously. "Not yet, but our best warriors are chasing him. He will be caught sooner or later."

"Why would they try to kill you?" Clarke asked, shaking her head. It wasn't Lexa that had ignited their ire, it had been them. The Arkers. "Why wouldn't they just kill me?"

"They believe I have grown weak."

Lexa pulled her coat back over her shoulders with only the smallest of flinches. Clarke was about to tell her to lie back down and get some rest when the door swung open with a bang and Octavia's
head appeared in the opening.

"Commander, Clarke, you should come. Things are getting tense."

Lexa moved as if to get up and Clarke held her back with a hand on her uninjured shoulder. "No, you're wounded, you need your rest. Stay here."

The Alpha's eyes narrowed, but she nodded stiffly, relaxing back against the bedding. "Take Gustus with you."

"Heda."

"No, Gustus. I'll be fine."

He obeyed grudgingly, following Octavia and Clarke out the door, though not without giving Clarke a glare as she passed him.

The tension in the air was palpable as Clarke stepped outside the hut into the glaring sun. They couldn't have been in there longer than an hour, but in that time, they all had managed to divide themselves into two fronts.

Grounders and Sky People stood on opposite sides, glaring at each other. The Arkers had no weapons and the Grounders had not drawn theirs yet, but their twitchy fingers and the overwhelming smell of aggressive Alpha pheromones in the air made it clear that that would not be so for long.

Clarke casually raised a hand to her nose and hoped Lexa's scent still covered her. She did not want to take any unnecessary risks, not with so many Alphas angry and aggressive and ready to tear each other's throats out - or overpower an unclaimed Omega stupid enough to walk right into their midst.

Some had decided to take a neutral position. A few Grounders, amongst them Indra, stood in the middle as if to physically prevent them from attacking each other. Kane had his hands raised, speaking reassurances Clarke couldn't make out. Bellamy and her mother stood at the front, either shielding or keeping a red-faced Murphy in check.

"What's going on here?"

"Those fucking knotheads thought they could just grab my ass and get away with it," Murphy spat, an angry vein pulsing in his forehead.

Quint - who was the head of the opposing force, unsurprisingly - scoffed. "The little bitch almost bit off my finger. He should be grateful any Alpha in this village would give him the time of day."

He turned around to adress the rest of the village. "Are we really going to accept Skaikru in our midst? Are you really going to accept them in your village? After they burned three hundred of our warriors? After one of theirs killed your friends, your family, in cold blood?"

Not all of them understood English, Clarke knew, but the warriors helpfully translated the speech and garnered affirmative whispers and even a few loud shouts.

Quint laughed bitterly. "And here they are, safe and sound, while the murderer who killed your loved ones walks free. One of them even tricked our Commander into mating her."

His voice dripped with disgust. "And it may yet be the death of her."
The shouts of dissent grew louder and more insistent, the jumble of scents growing heavier and
darker, like a swarm of angry hornets.

"Your Commander is just fine," Clarke shouted above the din of the crowd. "Whoever attacked her
has not succeeded."

Was it just her imagination, or did Quint look vaguely disappointed? She hadn't seen him when
they'd brought Lexa in, she remembered.

"Perhaps," he barked, straightening to his full height. "He should have."

An appalled murmur rose amongst the crowd at his words. Clarke would have liked to get into his
face and tell him just where he could shove his thoughts of mutiny, but she didn't dare come any
closer. Her nostrils were already filled with Alpha musk and her body was starting to respond with a
low hum in her stomach. It was dangerous enough to be here at all, as an unclaimed Omega who had
yet to be knotted for the first time, and without Lexa to aid as a shield this confrontation could have
horrifying consequences.

"If the Commander is so easily tempted by an Omega whore, then maybe she should leave the
position to someone else." His gaze turned to Bellamy and he scoffed. "Apparently she is not even
Alpha enough to keep her own mate satisfi-"

Gustus' fist crashed into his face with a sickening crunch. Clarke hadn't even seen him move from his
place behind her.

Quint's head jerked back as blood burst from his obviously broken nose. He pressed the palm of his
hand to his face to stem the flow of blood - without much success, as the liquid only continued to run
down his wrist and into the sleeves of his shirt.

Gustus loomed over him, not in the least bit bothered by the furious scowl aimed at him. The crowd
had fallen absolutely silent.

"You will not dishonour the Commander behind her back," he said, calm and deadly. "And neither
will you dishonour her by treating her guests with anything short of absolute respect."

Even Murphy had stopped struggling against the hands holding him back, watching the spectacle
with taut shoulders.

"The Commander is not even here," Quint snapped, deviously inching away from the large man.
"Because this so-called alliance almost killed her!"

"Ai nou ste daun, Quint."

Clarke's head - along with everyone else's - turned sharply to watch Lexa approach. Her head was
held high, one of her hands resting on the knife at her hip, and she took in the situation with a
collected, cool gaze.

Nothing about her indicated that she'd been shot just an hour ago. Nothing that an untrained eye
would see, in any case. Clarke did. Her eyes immediatly zeroed in on the erratic pulse jumping at the
base of the Alpha's throat, the drop of sweat running down her temple, the paleness her war paint just
couldn't hide.

Lexa had to be in a great amount of pain, Clarke knew that, and yet she held herself as though it
were any other day, strolling towards the commotion with long, purposeful strides.
She stopped next to Clarke and whether it was on purpose or not, Clarke breathed easier with only Lexa's scent surrounding her. She smelled exhausted and sick and, while still pleasant, it caused Clarke's body to calm and concentrate on emitting pheromones meant to heal rather than entice.

Without prompting, Gustus took up his place behind Lexa. He stood slightly closer than usual, arms held loosely at his sides, and Clarke realized that he was preparing to catch her should the pain prove to be too much.

"If you're displeased with my leadership, you have the right to challenge me whenever you wish," Lexa stated evenly, green eyes boring into Quint's.

Her hand around the handle of her knife didn't move an inch, but the placement alone was enough to convey her willingness to fight him right then and there. Clarke pressed her lips together to keep from protesting.

There was no way Lexa could fight anyone in her state and without the use of one arm, even suggesting it bordered on insanity. If Quint was the sort of man who was content to use any sort of advantage, he would have no trouble besting her - maybe even killing her.

She didn't voice her worries, not when Lexa so obviously wanted to appear unaffected by her injury, but an uneasy shiver worked its way down her spine.

Everyone held their breath as Quint straightened, wiping at the dried blood on his chin. He stared at the Commander, like he was gauging her sincerity - or his chances to take her.

Like many battles, this one was fought near silently. Quint's arm twitched as if to reach for his sword, but Lexa's low growl made him hesitate. She bared her teeth, her chest rumbling continuously and Quint shrunk further.

It was a ritual Clarke had seen many times, between many different Alphas. Alphas had a special relationship with each other. They were in constant competition for top dog, always at each other's throats at the slightest hint of aggression, and her mother had told her once that she hated other Alphas' smell. It made her bristle, she'd said. And yet they built packs, preferring to spend time with each other rather than with Betas.

Even her mother spent more time around Kane than anyone else, despite their constant struggles for dominance.

It was something Clarke had never quite been able to get her head around. Omega dynamics were different. They smelled pleasant to each other. Not in the way Alphas smelled pleasant to them, but like family, like their bodies were telling them to stick together, protect each other. She supposed it was a relict from the times before the Ark, before the numbers of Omegas had dwindled into near nothingness, back when Omegas had to avoid walking the streets at night for fear of being cornered and raped.

Quint spit a mouthful of blood on the ground and Clarke tensed, but then he merely turned his head to the side to expose his neck in a gesture of submission. The curtain of anxiety lifted and the Commander's quiet growl ceased.

"Skaikru are part of us now," Lexa addressed the nervously shifting Grounders. "They have our trust, as we have theirs. And you will show them the same respect you show your peers. You will show my mate the same respect you show me."

No one dared to say a word. Murphy looked like he might, but Bellamy quickly covered his mouth
with the palm of his hand.

Once it was clear that no one would challenge Lexa - this time - the Commander nodded and turned on her heel. Gustus made to follow her, but the Alpha muttered something Clarke couldn't understand and the large bodyguard stayed, frowning darkly.

His displeased expression only deepened when Clarke followed after Lexa, nodding for Bellamy to keep control of the situation before disappearing back into the hut.

Clarke barely had time to slip underneath Lexa's uninjured shoulder before the Commander's knees buckled. She was surprisingly light, even with the armour strapped to her body, and Clarke maneuvered her over to the bed with ease, gripping her forearms until Lexa had sunk safely onto the cot.

Lips pressed together, Clarke took hold of the Alpha's chin, turning her head this way and that, checking whether Lexa's eyes followed her. They did, though her eyelids were dropping periodically.

"That was incredibly stupid," she grumbled, pressing the back of her hand to the Commander's forehead to check for a fever. Her skin was pasty and clammy and Clarke supposed she preferred that to an infection. Blood could be replenished. "You've just been hit by an arrow, you need to rest, not give people like Quint an opening."

"It was necessary," Lexa insisted, stopping Clarke's fussing by brushing her hands aside. "My people need to know I'm strong."

"Well, you're not. Not at the moment. What do you think would have happened if Quint had decided to challenge you?"

The Commander shook her head. "Quint is an excellent strategist, but a lousy fighter. My chances of taking him were good."

Clarke crossed her arms in front of her chest, wondering whether Lexa truly believed she would have won or whether she simply didn't care.

"I could have handled it," Clarke said eventually, bristling at Lexa's raised eyebrow. She was used to being underestimated due to her status as an Omega, to being regarded as the weak link, but she'd thought that her and Lexa held - while not affection - at least a sort of mutual respect for each other. "I'm more than just an Omega."

The Alpha blinked, like Clarke's words had caught her off-guard.

"You probably could have handled it," Lexa said, easily and confidently enough that it caught Clarke off-guard. "That was never in doubt. It's not about me trusting you to deal with it, it's about them trusting me to keep control. I cannot expect them to follow me into battle if even my own Generals doubt me."

Clarke's posture loosened at the earnest expression on Lexa's face. The Commander didn't need to care for Clarke's feelings and she had no reason to lie.
"Can you move your shoulder alright?" Clarke asked, softer than she usually would. She took hold of the Alpha's elbow, coaxing her into rotating the limb.

It hurt, that much was clear from the slight downturn of Lexa's mouth, but it seemed like there would be no lasting damage.

Clarke tightened the bandages for no reason other than to give her hands something to do. She sighed.

Then, "I'm sorry."

Lexa's eyebrows rose sharply in surprise. "For what?"

"For getting you into this situation."

She had offered the deal because it was necessary for her people to survive. What she hadn't wasted a single thought on was how it would affect the Grounders' views on their Commander. She hadn't considered that she might be putting Lexa's life in danger rather than her own. Or maybe she hadn't cared.

Clarke remembered Indra's words to her - just a few days ago, though it seemed like a different lifetime.

*She would never put her people in jeopardy. Herself, however, she might not hold in such high regards.*

By agreeing to their union, by going against her people's wishes, Lexa had turned herself into the target of scorn and distrust. Her people wouldn't see the reasons behind her agreement - healthy Omegas for the continued existence of their tribes - just that she'd robbed them of their revenge and was cooperating with their enemies.

*Your actions will bring ruin to everyone, my kind and yours.*

If the assassin had succeeded, Clarke realized, if Lexa had died today, the alliance would have crumbled into dust. Chaos would have overtaken the Grounders, even if just for a moment, and the Mountain Men would have won.

"Why?" Lexa regarded her with a cocked head, idle curiosity playing across her features.

"Without you, there is no alliance, no hope of winning this war. I need you alive."

The Alpha smiled - a small, barely there smile that Clarke could not fathom the origin of.

"And would you decide differently, now that you're aware of the dangers?"

Clarke's neck tensed as she looked up into Lexa's eyes, calm and neutral and not at all concerned with her answer.

Did she feel regretful for having put another person into a possibly deadly situation, for being the reason the Commander now sat on the bed with bloody clothes and bandages wrapped around her shoulder? She did.

Would she do it differently, given the chance?

"No, I wouldn't," Clarke finally decided. It had been necessary. A choice between certain death and the sliver of hope for lasting peace.
Lexa nodded, like she had simply confirmed something she already knew. "Then do not apologize. There's no point, anyhow. It was not you that pulled the bowstring."

There was a strange sort of understanding that passed between them, an acknowledgment of what it meant to hold responsibility for more than just your own life.

"Even if it wouldn't have changed my decision," Clarke started, occupying herself with cleaning up the first-aid kit. "I'm sorry that you're in this position now. I wouldn't wish it on you."

"This is war and we do what we must. There's no sense in feeling guilty over doing your duty."

Clarke sat on the edge of the bed, making sure that their bodies wouldn't touch. The Commander regarded her suspiciously for a moment, attempting to ascertain whether it was another one of her tricks, but as Clarke made no move to invade her personal space, she relaxed fractionally.

"It doesn't have to make sense. It just is." She glanced at the Alpha from the corners of her eyes. "I didn't consider the consequences of our union beyond what it would do for my people."

It wasn't a good apology and a part of Clarke wondered whether her guilt stemmed from empathy for Lexa's position or from dread at carrying another life on her shoulders.

Even so, the Commander nodded, accepting her sentiment, and the forced distance between them since Clarke had put her plan into motion lessened, just a tad.

Chapter End Notes

They're moving forward, people. Little by little, but it's happening.

Trigedaslang:

"Weron..." = "Where..."
"Tondisi" = "TonDC"
"Ai nou ste daun, Quint." = "I am not dead, Quint."
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

In which Bellamy tries to explain the mystery of being an Alpha and Clarke and Lexa grow closer.

Chapter Notes

 Surprise update! I've been making good progress lately and thought I'd post a bit earlier than intended.

 On another note, as you can see I'm stretching the timeline of S2 quite a bit. These two idiots just need a lot of time to sort out their issues.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They were forced to stay in TonDC while the Commander healed up. The prolonged wait made Clarke nervous, knowing that every wasted day could mean another one dead in Mount Weather, but Lexa was in no condition to travel, much less lead an army.

Abby had done what she could after Lexa had ordered her warriors to let her through, but as lucky as the Commander had been, healing took time.

Time that was necessary and that they didn't have.

If there was one positive they gleaned from the extended waiting period, it was that the tension between Grounders and Arkers lessened. There were no more altercations after Lexa had made her position clear and their combined eagerness to go into battle and defeat Mount Weather served as a way of uniting them rather than crank up aggressiveness.

They weren't friends, not by a long shot, and Clarke wasn't sure they ever would be, but over the course of the next days, an uneasy truce had formed. Even Quint held himself back, nursing his broken nose with a glare whenever Clarke or Gustus came near him.

If any of the Grounders had realized by now that Clarke was still unclaimed, they didn't mention it, although she was ever aware of the suspicious glances they sent her way when she roamed the village alone or sought Bellamy's company.

She slept in Lexa's temporary hut at night anyway, just in case, and wore her jacket when she could, although her remaining scent was disappearing and being replaced by Clarke's own. There wasn't much else she could do.

Some of the awkwardness between them was disappearing, and Clarke supposed she was getting used to Lexa's company, and vice-versa. She hadn't attempted to seduce her again and Lexa being injured meant her scent wasn't affecting Clarke as much, didn't make her head feel woozy and out-of-sorts, while Clarke's pheromones speeded up the healing process.
It would have turned into a calming routine - checking on Lexa, making the rounds with Bellamy or Octavia, ensuring the Arkers and Grounders didn't kill each other - if Clarke hadn't been aware that her people were suffering, some most likely dead, if the worried itch underneath her skin didn't make her irritable and biting, prone to snapping at Bellamy and inspecting Lexa's wound with harsh, unnecessary movements.

After a week and a half, Clarke had had enough of sitting still and caught Bellamy as he returned from a hunting trip with Octavia. She jerked her head and strolled away from prying ears, not looking back to see if he followed her.

"What is it?" Bellamy asked once they were out of ear-shot, leaning against the rough bark of a tree. He was hesistant and careful, and Clarke couldn't blame him. She hadn't been the easiest to get along with lately.

"Lexa will take at least another week to heal up completely and I need some kind plan to keep our people save in the meantime."

His brow furrowed. "Have you talked to her about it yet?"

Clarke shook her head, crossing her arms in front of her chest as she looked back at the village. "Not yet. She can't make any decisions without consulting her Generals first, or we'd have a mutiny on our hands. And they won't continue our talks until they're sure their Commander is fit to lead them into battle."

"Then what are we supposed to do? You know I'd march on that mountain without the Grounders if I could, but we don't have the manpower."

"We need an option that doesn't involve the Grounders. Something with minimal casualties."

Bellamy contemplated the ground for a moment, drawing unrecognizable patterns into the dirt with the tip of his boot before he blinked and raised his head.

"Lincoln," he said. "He knows the way into Mount Weather, through the mines."

"He's not in any condition to go back there, not so soon."

"He won't have to. He can lead me there, we'll take out the guards, and I'll slip in before anyone notices."

Clarke mulled it over. "It's too dangerous," she finally said, leaning against the tree next to him and staring up into the branches. "They must have tightened security after my escape and I need you to take care of the people back at camp. Kane and my mother mean well, but they don't have the experience we have."

"Monroe can take my place. She's been fighting at my side longer than anyone else, she's good with a gun and she's got a talent for remembering the lay of the land."

"Are you sure she's up for taking over for as long as you're away? She abandoned her post when the Grounders attacked camp, remember?" Clarke asked, the edges of her mouth pulling down. She wanted to know that the camp was in good hands and she couldn't worry that Monroe would leave them to their own devices half-way through.

"She is," Bellamy nodded. "Don't worry, she's been doing good. And I know she won't abandon her people again."
"Even so, we can't risk it," she decided. "I need you. There aren't a lot of people I can trust to pull through when it comes to it. And..." she hesitated. "I don't want to lose another friend."

He huffed out a breath, bumping her shoulder with his. "You won't." His expression turned serious as he stuffed his hands into the pockets of his pants. "But if that's not an option, we're gonna have to think of something else. To be honest, nothing comes to mind apart from waiting for the Commander to recover."

"Keep thinking, we'll find something else."

Bellamy nodded in agreement, though he looked sceptical. After a moment of contemplative silence, Clarke opened her mouth.

"How is everyone else doing?"

She suddenly realized she hadn't much cared about that for the last week, content with knowing they were safe - physically, at least. She didn't have the time to care, not anymore.

"Kane is trying to talk to the Grounders, trying to make friends. It's going about as well as you might expect," he told her with a shrug. "Your mom has been spending time with their healer, Nyko, probably discussing medicine. And you already know about Octavia. I don't know how, but she managed to earn the Chief's respect."

A proud smile lit up his features at the thought of his sister and Clarke had to agree. Out of all of them, Octavia was the only one who melted into Grounder society like she'd never known differently. And maybe she hadn't, locked up as she'd been.

"And Murphy?"

Murphy had been a surprisingly rare sight lately. Where usually he'd always seemed to be where Clarke didn't want him, now he'd all but disappeared, only showing up to meals. He'd been calm, peaceful even, and it worried Clarke.

Bellamy looked up at the darkening sky, sweeping a lock of hair out of his eye. It was going to have to be cut soon, long as it had gotten.

"The Commander's bodyguard has been looking after him."

"Gustus?"

If Gustus had been anywhere but at Lexa's side during the week, Clarke hadn't noticed it. Whenever she came to take a look at the Commander's shoulder, he was there, carefully observing her every move. Even at night, his presence remained hovering in front of the door.

"If that's his name. It's probably a good thing, after the incident with Quint. They stay away from you because they think you're the Commander's, but Murphy doesn't have that advantage. He's just unclaimed meat to the Alphas here."

As she and Octavia would be, if they didn't think they were the property of another Alpha, Clarke thought bitterly.

"What about you?"

Clarke hadn't missed the hostility the Grounders still showed him. She'd gone out of her way to talk less with him in hopes of clearing up any misunderstandings, but the mere fact that they interacted at
all seemed to be reason enough to assume Bellamy was a threat. Clarke didn't much care for what the Grounders thought of her personally, not unless it became a problem, but if it continued to drive a wedge between the two cultures, something would have to be done.

"Well, they're not exactly welcoming," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "But they haven't tried to drive me out of the village yet. I think they'll tolerate me so long as the Commander doesn't mind."

"It'll be fine, then. I don't think she cares enough to have her instincts ruffled by you."

Bellamy made an unconvinced noise in the back of his throat. "She's still an Alpha, Clarke. Whether she cares or not, you're her mate - in some way, at least. Her instincts will tell her that you're hers and they won't like my smell anywhere near you one bit."

Clarke's eyes narrowed as she glanced at him from the corners of her eyes. "I'm not her possession, no matter what her instincts tell her."

"Intellectually, she probably knows that. As you said, she doesn't seem very possessive of you. But our instincts are different. They're a part of us we can't control." He raised his hands placatingly when she opened her mouth to protest. "That doesn't mean we're not responsible for our actions. It just means that what her brain is telling her doesn't have to match up with what her body is telling her."

Clarke lowered her shoulders slowly. Body and mind not being on the same page was something she could grasp, something she could understand. Alphas seemed like very foreign creatures to her, at times. They held every advantage there was despite - or maybe because of - their penchant for solving things with their fists rather than their heads. Omegas were expected to obey them for no more reason than that they were Alphas.

She thought back to Lexa's rejection to her blatant offer, the rejection she'd given her all of three times, and breathed out.

"The Commander has her Alpha under control," she decided. "She won't turn on you for spending time with me."

"Maybe not now, but what about in a week? A month? I can't tell you what she thinks, but I know what an Alpha in her situation would feel. You haven't mated, but you're bonded by Grounder law. You carry her scent - intentionally - but she hasn't staked a claim. Everything about you says you're hers, but that means nothing in the grand scheme of things as long as you're still technically unclaimed. My presence magnifies that and her instincts won't just pack up and go home."

Clarke's torso against the tree was stiff, the tips of her fingers nervously running along the handle of her knife.

"Hey, I'm not saying she'll try and rip out my throat or anything," he said, grimacing at her apprehensive glare. "Some Alphas have a better grip on their urges than others. All I mean is that no one has 'their Alpha' under control, because there is no such thing. You can't separate person from Alpha. You can't separate what you want from what you want."

"Can't you?" Clarke mumbled.

She could separate what she wanted from what her Omega wanted, and very easily. Her Omega wanted a strong Alpha and a knot, but Clarke wanted...what did she want?

She used to think it was Finn, and maybe it still was.
Bellamy eyed her worriedly, but didn't say another word. Clarke shook her head, determined to focus on more important things - her duties, for one - and began the silent trek back to camp.

Clarke slipped into the pleasantly warm hut. The weather had been getting progressively colder lately - not yet enough to turn the leaves brown, but enough to make her grateful for the thick material of Lexa's jacket. What they would do if winter came and they hadn't managed to put an end to this war yet Clarke couldn't think about.

The first thing she noticed upon entering was that Gustus was not milling about like an over-protective mother hen. In fact, the large Grounder was nowhere to be seen and Clarke couldn't remember the last time he hadn't been watching her like a hawk. She supposed that the Commander had finally told him to get some sleep.

The second thing she noticed was that the bed was rumpled and Lexa wasn't in it. Instead, the Alpha stood at the window, arms bent back at an awkward angle and fingers grasping at the loose strands of her hair. It looked freshly washed - courtesy of Gustus, Clarke hoped with a disapproving look at the occasional twitch of pain running through the Commander's frame.

"Hey, what are you doing? You're straining your shoulder."

Lexa grunted non-commitally and continued fiddling with her hair, making Clarke suspect she wasn't listening.

"Hey," Clarke repeated, reaching out to tip her on the shoulder.

The Alpha gave a barely noticable flinch and a hiss of pain as her arms jerked in surprise.

"Clarke." Lexa turned around, arms falling at her sides. Clarke's eyes narrowed at the hint of redness seeping through the bandages wrapped around her shoulder and torso.

"Your wound re-opened. My mom told you not to put any unnecessary strain on it."

"It's not a serious injury," the Commander stated. "I'm perfectly aware of my own limits."

"If you were, I wouldn't need to change your bandage again." Clarke rummaged around in the first-aid kit on the table, pulling out the equipment she needed. Lexa still stood by the window, tall and stiff.

"I have survived worse. There's no need for me to stay put any longer," Lexa said, raising her head. "I am an Alpha. I cannot show weakness and a simple injury will not keep me."

Clarke scowled. "I don't care about your Alpha pride, Lexa. The faster you recover, the faster we can march on Mount Weather and the faster we can save our people. We don't have time for you to sabotage your recovery."

As far as Clarke was concerned, it was none of her business if the Commander wanted to be stubborn, but she wouldn't accept a case of pride getting in the way of her people's freedom.

Lexa's jaw fluttered, but she sank down onto the cot without protest, pulling her tank over her head with one arm. The movement looked stiff and careful, but it didn't seem to trouble her beyond that, and Carke gave an approving hum.
She leaned down and unwrapped the bandages quickly and efficiently, breathing shallowly. Lexa had been recovering fast and that meant her scent had started to go from weak and sickly back to the Alpha musk she usually emitted. And that meant that Clarke's body ached and demanded things she wasn't willing to give it. Gustus had served as a buffer for the last week, his broad frame an ever-present reminder of their dire situation, but they were alone now, and Clarke tried to breathe as little as possible.

Lexa was still weak from her injury and so her smell wasn't as intense as it could be, and Clarke was grateful for it.

The Commander regarded her silently, eyes narrowed and head held at an angle away from her. Clarke didn't doubt that she could sense her struggle not to breathe in, although she wasn't sure whether it wasn't just Bellamy's scent that caused Lexa to avoid their proximity.

"I'm not going to try and seduce you again," Clarke muttered just in case, pointedly concentrating on cleaning and redressing the wound instead of the scent lingering on the flat planes and angles of the Alpha's near-naked torso. "You can relax."

Whether Lexa believed her or not, the muscles in her neck eased as she allowed her head to rest in a more natural position.

"You say you want to end this war as quickly as possible," the Commander said once Clarke had finished patching her up and handed her the shirt she'd discarded. "But you insist I should stay here when you obviously wish to proceed with our plans."

"Your Generals won't go ahead when they think you're not strong enough yet." Clarke sighed, putting the equipment away and watching the Alpha's leg bounce nervously.

"They don't need to know that I'm not healed fully."

"You're pale, your arms tremble and you look like you haven't slept at all in the last week," Clarke explained passively. "They'll know. And we need you at full strength."

Clarke knew that Lexa was anxious to get out of this hut and away from the cabin fever that had gripped her. She felt much the same way, despite having free reign of the village and the surrounding forests.

She sat on the edge of the bed.

"Look, I know you're tired of being cooped up in here," she said. "We both are. But there's not much we can do right now, except for look for a way to make the wait bearable."

"That's exactly what I'm attempting to do."

"Something that does not involve you overexerting yourself, Lexa."

The Commander's brows drew together. "As in?"

"What?" Clarke asked, startled.

"You don't want me to move around as I would like - then what else should I do to 'make the wait more bearable'?"

Clarke's nostrils flared, instinctively breathing in big gulps of the Alpha's scent, even as she cocked her head to think of something - anything - else.
Lexa cleared her throat.

"As you said, my Generals will not go ahead while I'm injured. There's no sense in talking about the war in the meantime," Lexa added, staring straight ahead.

Clarke looked around, seeing...well, nothing. The hut was bare except for the cot they were sitting on, a small table in the corner and the make-shift bedding Clarke had been sleeping on at night. She tried to think back to the last time she'd had nothing to do and found that she couldn't remember. Even back on the Ark, there had always been something to do, something to study. Whether she was playing chess with Wells or reading her books about Earth or drawing, she'd always been busy. Even more so after the other delinquents had come to depend on her for their survival.

If the dissatisfied slope of Lexa's mouth was any indication, she wasn't used to being inactive either.

"We could...talk," she offered carefully. It was a peace offering more than anything. Lexa had been as respectful as one could be in the situation they were in - too respectful at times, Clarke thought darkly - and while she wasn't sure the relationship between their people, the relationship between _them_, between Alphas and Omegas, would allow for any sort of friendly feelings to form, Clarke was willing to try.

The Commander was maybe the only one with a basic understanding of the weight Clarke carried on her shoulders - the weight of two hundred lives.

Lexa didn't look at her, her expression unreadable as she glanced out the window, and for a moment Clarke thought the Alpha would reject the proverbial olive branch, but then she gave a short nod.

"Very well. What would you like to talk about?"

Clarke thought back to the short conversation they'd had on the way to TonDC, about the Ark and Earth. She thought about Costia, too, but was neither sure that question would be answered nor willing to risk questions about Finn in return.

"Tell me about the tribes," she finally settled on. She knew only what she'd snatched up during conversation - that there were twelve of them and that Lexa had been the first Commander to unite them.

The Commander looked up as if to gather her thoughts before beginning to explain. Before she'd been called to duty, during the reign of the previous Commander, the tribes had been at war. The Woods Clan, the Ice Nation, the Sea Tribe and all of the others had been fighting over resources and territory, too busy with killing each other to act against the real threat - the Mountain Men that had been abducting their warriors and scouts for decades.

Curiosity gnawed at Clarke, wondering about Lexa's childhood, her life before she'd been called to duty, but she suppressed it.

It wasn't a surprise to hear that Trigedakru and Azgedakru had had the most vicious rivalry of them all - a personal vendetta rather than a territorial one, since the Sea Nation lay between them as a buffer. Carke would have liked to know how this tied in with Costia's death, how a grudge had gone so far as to warrant the murder of someone for the sole reason of her ties to the Commander, but that, too, was a question that went unasked.

She listened to the retelling quietly, to the stories of diplomacy as much as bloodshed, until the Commander had fallen silent, lost in memories.

"Is there something you want to ask me?" Clarke offered, watching as Lexa blinked at being pulled
out of her thoughts.

The Alpha seemed to consider the question for a moment, throwing another glance out the window, before she swallowed.

"Have you-" she swallowed again and Clarke got the distinct feeling that, for once, the calm on Lexa's face was only skin-deep. "Have you seen the stars? Really seen them?"

Clarke frowned. "Seen them?"

"From up there."

A glimmer of understanding made Clarke's eyebrows rise. Of course. The Grounders, being bound to the earth beneath their feet, would never have seen the stars as anything but flecks of light in the night sky. She wondered if they, too, longed to see what was beyond their realm of existence, just like she had longed to see Earth for so long.

Did they - did Lexa - dream of the stars like a long-forgotten memory, like an image that was so far out of their reach it seemed fictional rather than something tangible? Clarke remembered thinking of Earth that way, confined to a cell with nothing but pictures in her mind. It seemed like a novelty now, to be able to wish for anything beyond surviving the next day.

"Stars are made of gas," she tried to explain, forming an imaginary sphere in the air with her hands. "The reason they glimmer and why you can see them from here is because they're in a constant state of thermonuclear fusion - they explode, to put it simply."

The Commander's eyes widened slightly.

"Think of it like a spark," Clarke hurried to add at the look of confusion. "A spark that lasts for billions of years until there is nothing left to burn. The sun is a star, for example."

Lixa watched her own hands, rubbing across the small scars zig-zagging the surface of her palms.

"It sounds destructive," she said after a while, lost in her own thoughts. "Not quite the way our Keepers tell it."

"Keepers?"

"The people who keep track of our history."

Clarke had never considered that the Grounders might have historians, hadn't considered them to put much value on the preservation of their past beyond the battle lust they so readily displayed. It made sense, however, considering the importance of their culture and traditions.

"What do they say about stars?" Clarke asked curiously, unconsciously leaning closer when the Alpha grumbled quietly at the pull in her shoulder to wrap her in soothing pheromones.

"They are the souls of our departed, spirits that rise up in smoke and travel towards the sky. They are our ancestors, our loved ones, the people we have lost," Lexa recited quietly, as though she'd heard - or said - it a thousand times. "They are the ones who keep watch over the living as they wait to be reborn, to keep fighting one more day."

The Commander idly brushed her fingers over her own wrist where Clarke had seen Anya's braid resting during their union ceremony.
"So your people believe the sky is where the dead go," Clarke summarized. "That every star used to be a person."

It was an oddly poetic thought, not much different than the Arkers' belief of a place beyond death, a place beyond the empty vastness of space.

"It's a matter of comfort rather than a matter of believing. A warrior will walk into danger for a great many things - ideals, pride, family - but never as eagerly as under the assumption that something, someone, is waiting for them in the afterlife."

"You don't sound convinced."

Clarke had often asked herself whether she would ever see those they'd lost again. Whether she'd ever be able to see her father again, feel the safety of his arms around her. Whether she'd ever greeted by Wells' broad smile again. She supposed they all had, at some point.

Lexa cocked her head, as if contemplating her statement. "You have seen the stars. If they were souls, you would know better than I."

The answer was evasive, and there clearly was more to tell, but Clarke leaned back and let it rest. If there was a time for soul-searching, now wasn't it.

Before the silence between them could become tense, Clarke hurried to think of something else, something non-personal.

"Stars aren't everything the sky has to offer," she said, leaning forward to get a look at Lexa's face. "There are millions of planets, just like Earth, millions of asteroids and comets."

She tried to think of what someone like the Commander who hadn't ever been in space would think of as interesting. Clarke had lived in space all her life and the black abyss of it had long since lost its charm, a reminder of the people that had died in its depths more than the stunning display of nature it probably had been to the first generation.

"Sometimes, there would be solar flares. Bursts of radiation from the sun. It's like...fire flying across space."

Lexa listened attentively, the cogs in her mind obviously trying to conjure up an image of what Clarke was telling her.

"Saturn - one of the planets in our solar system - has rings wrapping all around it."

"Our solar system?"

"We don't know how far the galaxy reaches. Potentially, it could go on forever. Our solar system is just one small part of everything else."

As Clarke kept talking, about anything and everything she could think of concerning the place she'd been born, about the rainbows and glories she'd seen from the windows of the Ark, about the billions of planets the Milky Way held, she watched the Commander's eyes grow bright in amazement, even as she obviously struggled to imagine any of the things Clarke talked of.

Clarke understood. Before coming to Earth, she couldn't have imagined the feeling of sunshine on her face or the sensation of rain pelting her face.

Time slipped away as she continued to answer Lexa's questions until her voice was hoarse, and it
was a welcome change from the usual pressure to do something, to keep going, to act now, that the erstwhile stand-still of their plans had awakened in her.

The perpetual crease between Clarke's brows lightened.

"Octavia, can I talk to you for a minute?"

Octavia turned her head from where she'd been observing the forest. Indra had increased the guards around TonDC, in case the traitor came back to finish the job. Clarke wasn't so sure it would be much use if the dissent came from their own ranks.

"Sure, what is it?"

"I need you to make a trip back to Camp Jaha and see if Lincoln is well enough to travel. If he is, bring him back here."

Octavia frowned. "For what? He just got back from the brink of death, he should get some rest."

Clarke ignored her displeased expression. "I just want to have a talk with him. He knows more about the ways into Mount Weather than I do and I can't leave while Lexa is still healing up."

It was probably hypocritical of her to force Lincoln to come here despite his injuries when she wouldn't allow the Commander to do so much as braid her own hair. Lexa was more important, she reminded herself, even if Octavia wouldn't see that.

"Sure," Octavia drawled carefully, studying Clarke's face with narrowed eyes. "But he's still unwell. If you're thinking about sending him back, don't bother. I won't let him go in there again, not so soon."

"I don't intend to." Not unless it was absolutely necessary, she silently added.

Octavia bit the inside of her cheek, but nodded. With the spark of an idea nagging at her mind, Clarke stopped short as she was about to turn back the way she came.

"Oh, and Octavia?"

"Yeah?"

Clarke glanced at the darkening sky. "Do me a favour and take a look around the Ark to see if there are any books left. About anything at all, though if you could find one about space, I'd appreciate it."

Octavia cocked her head in confusion, but didn't comment on the odd request.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: A bit of fluff, a bit of angst, a bit of humour...and beavers. Not necessarily in that order.
Clarke was getting antsy. Antsy and frustrated.

And she blamed it all on Lexa.

The injury the Commander had sustained was only a part of the problem - she was healing up quite nicely and should be good to go in just a few more days. In fact, she was healing up so well that it caused Clarke's frustration to go from simmering to all-out burning.

Her Alpha musk was no longer contained or dimmed and constantly being cloaked in the stuff made Clarke's libido act up like she was a pubescent Omega in her first heat. Even when she got a break from Lexa's presence, her scent stayed. It was an inevitable consequence of their close living arrangements, even if Clarke had taken to spending most of her time outside.

It kept the other Alphas, especially people like Quint, away from her, but she was starting to wonder whether fending off horny Alphas wouldn't be an easier choice than fending off her own instincts.

The thought was foolish, of course, and was caused by a part of her that had no dignity, no shame, no ounce of what made her a functioning human being rather than the breeding-obsessed Omega Quint had claimed she was. She'd wait and hope that she'd get used to it, to being near a strong, compatible Alpha with more self-control than any other Clarke had ever met.

Even that restraint screamed power and Clarke was so tired of dealing with shaky legs and wet panties.

"Clarke, you're about to rip my shirt," Lexa pointed out, not unkindly, and Clarke loosened her grip on the fabric with a start.

"Sorry." She didn't look at the Commander as she peeled away the adhesive bandage, taking care to tug at her collar just enough to bare the skin of her shoulder rather than strangle her with it.

"You're anxious. That's understandable."

Clarke was tempted to snap back at her, if only because she knew that Lexa couldn't have missed her pheromones going off like rockets on Unity Day and she wasn't sure whether the Alpha was commenting on that or on the fact that they'd been held up in TonDC for far too long.

"So are you," she pointed out instead, indicating the uneasy jiggling of the Commander's leg with a jerk of her chin. Lexa immediately ceased the movement, letting Clarke work quietly.

The arrow wound was red and angry, but no longer in danger of breaking open again, Clarke noted with a satisfied nod.
"How's the pain?" she asked, glancing up to make sure Lexa wasn't lying.

"Managable. As it has been for the last few days."

"Well, if it makes you feel better, Mom said you could take a walk outside today if I think you're well enough to do it."

The Commander's eyebrow arched. "How gracious. And I suspect I'm not allowed to make that walk by myself."

Clarke ignored the vaguely annoyed tone while she rose from her kneeling position to look down at the Alpha.

"I'll be going with you. Just in case."

A grunt was her only answer as Lexa heaved herself up from the cot, stretching her back until it popped. The relief was so evident that Clarke almost felt bad for keeping her in bed, despite the necessity of it.

"Do you have anywhere in particular you want to go?" she asked softly, reaching out her hands to be ready for any unforeseen difficulties.

Lexa seemed to think for a moment. "There's a lake a short walk from the village. I'd like to get cleaned up."

Clarke hadn't noticed much, but they were both filthy. Lexa because she'd had to rely on Gustus for hygiene in the last week and Clarke because, well, she hadn't had time to waste a thought on it. She took a lock of her own hair between her fingers and grimaced at the greasy quality of it.

No wonder Lexa's reaction to her was one of indifference - she probably smelled awful. It was different for unmated Alphas, who had a habit of accumulating musk to smell stronger. It made them more attractive to Omegas like her, or at the very least more dominant to their Alpha peers.

She supposed a bath would do them both good, especially if it meant she wouldn't have to cover her nose half the time she was in Lexa's company just to stop her hormones from going into overdrive.

A chorus of 'Heda' greeted them as soon as they set foot outside and Lexa's back straightened as she nodded at her people. Clarke wasn't sure she'd ever get used to the admiration people showed the Commander. It was more than just the simple submissiveness of lesser Alphas and Betas towards their more dominant peers - it was genuine joy at seeing her alive and well.

She didn't know what Grounder society was like before Lexa had united the tribes apart from what the Commander herself had told her, but she could only guess it was part of the reason they respected the Alpha.

"I haven't seen Gustus in a while," Clarke commented conversationally as they made their way through the small buildings into the surrounding forest. Considering his usual tendencies, his sudden absence was glaringly obvious.

"Even a warrior like him needs to sleep," Lexa explained shortly, her shoulders slumping back into a more comfortable position as soon as they'd left the prying eyes of everyone else behind. "He's of no use to me exhausted."

"He cares about you a lot."
It was apparent in every one of his gestures, every single concerned glance he couldn't keep to himself. It called an aching memory of her own father to the forefront of Clarke's mind, even though she didn't think Lexa was related to her bodyguard by blood.

"Gustus has been with me ever since I was called to lead my people," the Commander said in lieu of a confirmation. "I trust him unconditionally."

Clarke looked at the woman walking next to her closely, wondering again about the smooth skin that told of her young age.

"How old were you when you became Commander?"

Lexa seemed to think for a moment. "It's been roughly five summers. I was in my sixteenth when I got called to duty."

"You've been leading these people into war since you were sixteen?"

Clarke couldn't imagine it. She was just two years older now than Lexa had been back then, but the way she'd struggled - was still struggling - was something she could see no sixteen-year old doing. Especially not in a society as ruthless as this, a society that was willing to kill their leader for showing mercy.

"War is not everything there is, Clarke. Wars end."

"Do they really?" Clarke asked quietly, catching sight of the circular scars on the back of the Alpha's shoulder peeking out from beneath her top.

"There is always an end, one way or another."

The continued the rest of their trek in silence, enjoying the unusually warm temperature and the sun shining down on them, until they came upon the lake Lexa had described.

It wasn't large, spanning just far enough to offer the opportunity for a swim if one were so inclined, but it was beautiful. Quiet and serene, as much as anything could be in this world.

As Lexa grabbed the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head, Clarke couldn't help but remember that they'd almost lost Octavia to one such quiet lake. It seemed so far away now, even though it couldn't have been more than a few months since then.

"Are you sure it's safe?" she asked, looking away as Lexa stripped. She didn't know whether Grounders bothered with underwear and she wasn't inclined to find out.

"It's safe."

There was the quiet splash of legs dragging through water and when Clarke dared to take a peek, the Commander was submerged up to her neck. She didn't look at her, quietly undertaking the task of cleaning herself of the grime and sweat of the last few days, and Clarke hesitantly began to shed her own clothes.

It wasn't like Lexa hadn't seen her half-naked before. If Clarke had had her way, the Alpha would have done more than get an eyeful of naked flesh.

It felt different now, somehow. They were married, at least in name, and Clarke liked to think that they got along, despite everything. It was simply this damned tension that accompanied every single one of their interactions that made her hesitate. If Clarke wasn't an Omega, if Lexa wasn't an Alpha,
this would be no different than all the other times Clarke had been forced to bathe in company.

As it stood, Clarke decided to keep her underwear on and hastily stepped into the cool water, stopping as soon as it reached the underside of her breasts.

She didn’t feel comfortable going in further than that.

Clarke released a small sigh of relief at the water lapping at her skin, feeling a small ounce of tension fall from her shoulders. She took care to scrub her skin thoroughly, only realizing how grimey she’d felt now that she got the opportunity to wash.

When she glanced at Lexa, the Alpha was lathering something into her dripping wet hair.

"Is that...shampoo?" Clarke asked with raised eyebrows. She wouldn’t put it past the Grounders to whip up something other than poison.

"We use it to clean our hair," Lexa explained hesitantly, obviously unsure what 'shampoo' was. "Would you like some?"

Clarke nodded and took a few more steps towards the Commander before halting abruptly. It was almost too deep to stand.

"I can't swim," she admitted. In fact, even standing on the tips of her toes made her feel short of breath. "Just throw it here."

Lexa merely cocked her head and swam closer, holding out a small glass flask. She was close, too close, and Clarke swallowed as she took in the Alpha's fresh, clean scent. The musk was weaker now, but it only served to give her smell a sharp edge of Lexa and it made the situation feel much more intimate than it had any right to be.

Her gaze inexplicably followed the column of the Alpha's throat down to her upper chest. The water was clear enough that if Clarke looked just a little further...

She shook her head sharply, taking the glass vial with a quiet "Thanks".

The fluid was more of an oil than actual shampoo, but when Clarke took a whiff of it, she thought she detected pine cones. It smelled like Lexa, she acknowledged with a start.

It was a novel feeling, to wash her hair with something like actual soap and Clarke closed her eyes as she enjoyed the tingling sensation in her scalp, trying to ignore how many months of grime she was getting rid off. It had been too long since she'd felt clean, really clean, and she sighed happily, momentarily forgetting everything else.

A quiet growl pulled her from that blissful emptiness and her eyes blinked open to catch the source of the sound, but Lexa's face was turned away from her as she rinsed her hair and Clarke supposed she'd imagined the sound.

After she’d cleared her blonde locks of the oil, she looked around for her discarded clothes. "Should we head back?"

This encounter had been surprisingly simple until now and Clarke wanted to keep it that way. The smell of wet earth filled her nose rather than the scent of Alpha she was usually subjected to and she didn't want to risk it. Omegas were different in regards to scent. They didn't collect musk, didn't have to, and the cleaner she was, the stronger her natural scent became.
She didn't feel like making things more difficult for Lexa - or herself, at the very least.

Lexa hummed. "In a moment. I'd like to take a swim first, if that's alright with you?"

Clarke blinked. Alphas didn't ask for permission, they ordered. They acted. Lexa didn't, not always, and it threw her. Level-headedness was not a virtue Alphas were known for, least of all those in positions of power. It was the reason almost every Chancellor in the last 97 years had been a Beta - for all their natural aptitude, Alphas were considered too aggressive to command the people of the Ark.

"Sure, go ahead. Your bandage is already soaked anyway."

Lexa made to dive into the cool waters, but hesitated. She opened her mouth as if to speak, before deciding against it and slipping under the surface.

Her movements were elegant and Clarke couldn't help but watch her shoulders and arms glide smoothly through the cool water as the Alpha rapidly gained distance on her.

Clarke looked down at herself, clumsy and unsure when there was no hard ground beneath her feet. She'd been on Earth for a while now, but there had never been an opportunity to learn how to swim, partly because she simply lacked the time and partly because she hadn't known where to start.

Another glance confirmed that Lexa was well away from her, almost on the other side of the lake, and with a deep breath, Clarke let her feet part from the muddy sand between her toes.

She floated for only a moment, feeling like she was suspended mid-air, before she gave into her instincts to move, to gain control of the situation, and toppled face-first into the water, arms and legs rowing uselessly.

"For the love of-" she sputtered, swallowing a mouthful of water as her head broke back through the surface. Her flailing arms did nothing to help her stay afloat and she couldn't find purchase against the non-existent ground beneath her.

She managed to gasp in a breath of air before she went under, the bubbles bursting from her mouth and nose turning the action null and void. She was half-convinced she'd die here, miserably drowning in a puddle, when something pushed against her stomach and suddenly her toes brushed against soft, pliable earth.

Her lungs couldn't quite decide between breathing and coughing and so she spent long moments hunched over and wheezing until her rapid heartbeat had calmed to acceptable levels. Only then did she notice careful fingertips resting on her back and Lexa standing next to her, regarding her in alarm.

"I'm fine," she answered the unspoken question, the Alpha's fingers retreating from her bare skin. "I just slipped."

If Lexa had caught her lie, she didn't mention it, and Clarke wasn't about to make this anymore embarrassing for herself than she had to. The amusement twitching at the corners of Lexa's mouth was more than enough.

"I can teach you how to swim, if you wish."

Clarke opened her mouth to decline, then closed it. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea. Being able to swim might come in handy at some point. At the very least, it couldn't hurt and Lexa was as good a teacher as anyone else.
"Okay."

The Commander nodded and gestured towards her stiff shoulders. "You're too tense. That's why you went under. Lay on your back, it will make you feel more comfortable."

Clarke felt exceedingly vulnerable as she shifted her torso and legs and finally lay on the water's surface. It was too open. If anyone came upon her like this, she'd be dead - or worse - before she could so much as scrabble back to the shore.

"Good. Move your arms and legs, carefully."

She couldn't see Lexa from her vantage point, but her voice was calm and reassuring and Clarke relaxed fractionally. Her scent helped. If she could count on the Commander for one thing, it was to be ever-mindful of their surroundings.

With slow movements, mindful of the last time she'd tried, Clarke's arms began to glide up and down, soon followed by her legs.

It was...almost peaceful. When she dipped her head back, her ears were submerged in water and the sounds surrounding her - the quiet gurgle of the lake, the chirping of birds, the rustling of leaves - ceased. All she could hear and feel was her own breathing and the beating of her heart. Not even her own thoughts could penetrate the silence.

**Clarke**

She flinched, automatically trying to sit up and flailing when she realized that the ground had once again disappeared.

A moment of panic was halted by steadying hands on her back, keeping her in a secure grip and restoring the precarious balance.

"I didn't mean to startle you, but you were drifting too far away," Lexa apologized, retracting her hands as soon as she was sure Clarke wouldn't sink again. "Try turning around now, on your stomach."

Clarke did, or attempted to. She had a hard time keeping her head up and was sure she looked ridiculous with her butt sticking out of the water. She was grateful she'd kept on her underwear.

Lexa's hands returned, this time sliding one underneath her belly to keep her afloat and the other lying on her lower back to push her into a less awkward position. Goosebumps erupted on her skin, both because of the cool air blowing across her wet skin and because her inner Omega chose this moment to remind her that Lexa was a virile Alpha - and a very naked one at that.

The Commander no doubt noticed the increased pheromones and lightened her touch in response. It didn't do much to dispel the scent - it never did, no matter how much they both tried - and the fleeting brushes of skin on skin only served to elicit a shiver from Clarke.

"You've seen me swim?"

Clarke nodded as much as she could.

"Emulate the movements. All you have to do is move forward, the water will do the rest."

Her arms were clumsy in their movements and coordinating them with her legs was harder than she'd initially thought, but soon she had a nice rhythm going. Lexa held her in place as she tried, correcting
her position and the flow of her limbs as she saw fit. Clarke forgot their proximity as she followed the Alpha's instructions on her breathing, concentrating on not swallowing any more water.

Lexa was silent for the most part, only commenting to give her pointers or to mutter quiet encouragement.

It was so simple, in a way few things were in the world they inhabited.

"Your legs are not fluid enough yet," Lexa said and moved in front of her instead. Clarke tensed and floundered when the Commander's hand disappeared from her belly, only to breathe out when it slid around her wrist instead.

"Try to concentrate on them for now, I'll hold you steady."

Clarke jerked her head in affirmation, but couldn't get her legs to cooperate. Her arms were slack in the Alpha's delicate grip and it lacked the tension she needed.

Lexa's throat bobbed as she swallowed.

"Here," she muttered, lifting Clarke's arms out of the water. "Put them on my shoulders."

She sunk down until Clarke could grip her comfortably, mindful of the still-stinging injury. Clarke's fingers twitched against the subtle muscles playing underneath the Alpha's skin, fighting the sudden urge to slip her arms around her neck and breathe in more of her scent.

Touching Lexa wasn't new for Clarke. She'd had to do a lot of it lately, if only to treat her wound. This felt different.

It wasn't a necessity, not really, and Clarke found that this contact between them - contact for no reason other than to give her a helping hand - felt strange, as if it would throw her, disconnect her from reality.

She shook the odd feeling and concentrated on her legs, gently lashing through the water until she had perfected a strong, casual rhythm.

All the while, her eyes were glued to the base of the Commander's throat where her pulse jumped and flowed, as steady and firm as the rest of her. The skin of Clarke's hands stood out in stark relief against Lexa's own tanner complexion.

The Alpha had gotten paler during her forced rest, but the healthy tone of her skin remained.

It was easier to ignore the naked skin beneath the water surface than remember that it would be the most natural thing in the world, very much expected, in fact, for Lexa to resign to the Alpha thing to do - to pull Clarke towards her by her wrists and press them together, parting Clarke's thighs to wrap the limbs around her hips. The Alpha thing to do would be to sink her teeth into Clarke's throat and her fingers into Clarke's ass and fuck her until they were both sweaty and exhausted and tied.

What wasn't the Alpha thing to do was to pull away from Clarke's grasp without a single lingering touch. Clarke didn't understand how Lexa could remain so unaffected, whether it was simple restraint or whether the Alpha really wasn't attracted to her beyond her Omega pheromones.

It didn't matter, she decided firmly. It didn't. As many difficulties as it brought, at the very least Clarke was free to decide over her own body. It was more than most Omegas got and certainly more than Clarke had ever expected.
"You should be able to do it on your own now," the Commander stated, clearing her throat. "Try it."

Clarke knew what she was doing didn't look particularly elegant or skillful, but unlike her earlier tries, she managed to stay above the surface.

Lexa watched her for a few moments before jerking her head towards the far shore. "Follow me, I want to show you something."

The area she was pointing to was overgrown with trees and bushes and Clarke followed her curiously, squinting at the impenetrable mass of green. It took them far longer to reach their destination than it should have thanks to Clarke's clumsy paddling, but reaching the shore at all was more than Clarke would have expected of herself.

Even from up close, there wasn't much to see beyond leaves and twigs, although Lexa twisted her head this way and that as if she was looking for something in particular. Clarke waited silently.

The Alpha made a pleased sound in the back of her throat when her eyes finally seemed to alight on her objective and she reached for a thin branch. There was the smallest of smiles on her face as she laid a single finger on her lips and quietly pulled back the leaves.

Three small, furry heads bobbed up and out of a mess of twigs and wood to look at them, their glistening black noses twitching curiously.

"Beavers," Clarke breathed out, taking in the tiny ears and flat tail. Newborns, by the looks of it. It was different, having them right in front of her eyes rather than on the flat pages of her books. She could see their beady eyes following every movement in their surroundings, the little breaths that raised and lowered their furry chests, the subtle movements of their paws.

"Most likely no older than a few weeks," Lexa confirmed. "They usually construct their homes in the middle of lakes and ponds."
"Out of branches and mud, I know. Build dams and fell entire trees if they have to."

The Commander blinked in surprise. "You know about them?"

"I read about them. I've never seen one, though, especially not kits." Clarke leaned subtly closer. "I never thought they'd be that small."

She observed the tiny creatures for long moments as they yawned and pawed uselessly at the air or their siblings, blinking into the sun.

"As cute as they are, why did you want me to see them?" she asked eventually, glancing at Lexa. It didn't seem like the Commander to lead her here purely for the sake of showing her baby animals.

Lexa kept her eyes on the critters rather than face her, swallowing. "I told you earlier today that war is not everything there is. When I fought my first war, I had a hard time separating what I felt from what I knew to be true."

Green eyes turned to Clarke.

"I know it feels like the fight will never end. I know it's easy to see only the worst during wartime, but...there are good things left in this world, Clarke. Time will not stop and wounds will heal."

Clarke swallowed around the sudden knot in her throat. "I don't know if I can believe that," she responded honestly. Whenever she closed her eyes, all she saw were those she couldn't save, all the difficulties that lay before them...all she saw was death. She wondered whether she'd ever be able to
come back from this war. Whether any of them could.

Bellamy, who'd seen the worst part of himself. Finn, who might never recover from his mistakes. Murphy, who never fit in anywhere. Raven, who had more taken from her than any of them. They all hurt, in one way or another.

Cautious fingertips on the back of her shoulder startled Clarke out of her thoughts.

"You won't. No one does, not when they've never had to fight a war before. Just try to believe me when I say...someday, things will be better."

Lexa's eyes were open and earnest and Clarke desperately wanted to believe her. She turned her attention back to the beaver kits and allowed her furrowed brows to soften.

"Thank you for showing them to me," she said, hesitantly leaning back against the Commander's hand before the Alpha had a chance to pull away. "I never get tired of seeing all the life down here."

It was oddly amusing, now that she thought about it. The strong, dominant Alpha pulling the helpless Omega aside...to show her a nest of baby animals. A far cry from what her teachers had warned her about back in Sex Ed.

"Why are you smiling?"

Clarke blinked at Lexa's question and realized...she was. The skin of her face felt unnaturally taut from the no longer familiar action, but she was smiling. It wasn't a big smile - something Clarke suspected would never come easy to her again - but it was there.

"It's just...most people wouldn't expect an Alpha to pull their mate aside for wildlife viewing," she huffed out - again, not quite a laugh, but closer than she'd gotten in some time.

The skin of her cheeks stretched a little wider at the slightest hint of redness creeping up Lexa's chest and neck.

"It is nobody's business what I-"

The Alpha stopped short when her sentence was interrupted by a low hissing noise. They turned their heads at the same time, coming face to face with another beaver - this one far bigger and far angrier than the others.

"Is that...?"

"Their mother, I believe." The Commander cleared her throat. "It would be best if we leave them be now. Beavers can be quite aggressive, especially when they feel their young are threatened."

As if on cue, the angry animal growled and lurched forward, sharp claws outstretched.

Clarke let out a startled yelp at the furry and really damn fast projectile flying her way and toppled over backwards in her surprise, back hitting the water surface with a loud splash.

"Clarke-"

Struggling to get away from the rabid creature - and failing to remember anything about her swimming lessons in her haste - her hands brushed against warm skin and she instinctively latched onto it.

'It' turned out to be Lexa's neck. And 'latching onto it' turned out to be something more akin to
strangling the woman.

"Clarke, I can't-"

The rest of the Commander's words got drowned out by a pitiful gurgle and more splashing as she went down underneath the weight around her neck.

Clarke lightened her grip, nervously looking around for the attacking beaver. The animal cowered upon the shore, glaring at them both but making no move to follow them into the water.

She breathed out a relieved sigh. The animal wasn't large, but books had told her that its teeth were not to be messed with and size didn't much matter to Clarke. Horse or beaver, she didn't feel particularly safe around animals, at least not the ones she had no experience with.

She grew up around machinery, not living creatures. Machines didn't try to bite or scratch you if you happened to come to close.

Only when a coughing Lexa lifted her arms from around her neck did she realize she was still very much holding onto her. Clarke hastily retracted her limbs, embarrassment at her own outburst welling up.

"I'm sorry." Her eyes automatically sought out the Commander's shoulder, but it seemed to be no worse for wear. "Did I hit your shoulder or anything?"

The Alpha shook her head, face red from what Clarke assumed to be lack of oxygen. "No, my shoulder is fine. Don't apologize, I should have warned you beforehand."

"A beaver shouldn't exactly be cause for concern," Clarke mumbled, glancing back over her shoulder at the shore. Of all the things she'd encountered since their landing on Earth, a beaver was probably the least dangerous.

Lexa cocked her head and shrugged stiffly, turning her back on Clarke. "It's natural for you to be cautious. You're-"

A splash of water hit the Commander's back and she turned around, blinking bewilderedly.

"I hope you didn't plan on saying 'you're an Omega'," Clarke stated dryly, hands already descending into the water to deliver another splashing should it be needed.

Lexa's eyes narrowed. Clarke wondered whether letting herself be lulled into a rare state of playfulness by the moment was a bad idea. Most people would probably advise against goading an Alpha.

The Alpha raised her hands, slowly and threateningly - only to let them crash back through the surface and cause a wave of water to break across Clarke's face.

Clarke sputtered, slicking her wet locks out of her face. Before she had a chance to retaliate and turn this into an all-out war, long fingers wrapped around her wrists in a gentle hold.

The amusement bubbling in Clarke's chest dropped and disappeared as they both quieted down and she realized how close their bodies were. Close enough that Clarke had to look up, just slightly, to meet Lexa's eyes.

Eyes that regarded her silently now, even as the fabric of Clarke's bra brushed against the Commander with every breath.
"I was going to say that it's natural for you to be cautious of things you are not familiar with," Lexa muttered quietly.

Clarke barely heard the words, taking in the Alpha's intoxicating scent so near. Spending time with Lexa had been strangely pleasant and she'd forgotten her usual reservations. Maybe she'd simply chosen to ignore them.

The Commander's muscles fluttered beneath the skin of her jaw, her eyes jumping from Clarke's eyes to her collarbones and lower.

Clarke's nipples hardened beneath the fabric of her bra and she was sure that if she dared to glance down, she'd see Lexa sporting an erection.

For once, Clarke was at an advantage. Clean as she was, her natural scent shone through stronger than ever, while the water had washed away much of Lexa's Alpha musk.

If she wanted to make a move, to test the Commander's resolve concerning the chasteness of their union once again, now would be the optimal time to do it. If the Alpha was ever going to give in, it would be right then and there, addled by continuous exposure to Clarke's pheromones and with her palms still resting on Clarke's wrists.

She considered it, considered going against her own decision not to pursue this further, but a small voice in the back of her head buzzed and called images to the forefront of her mind.

Images of Finn and his grinning face as he splashed her with water and told her to loosen up, to relax. He was still waiting for her, wasn't he? Even if she was confused, even if she didn't know how to go back to what they were, if they even could, if she even wanted to, he was waiting.

Images of the ache in Lexa's eyes, dulled by time but not forgotten, as she'd told her about Costia. She wondered if Lexa was still waiting for her too, in some way.

Neither the Commander nor herself deserved having their choices taken from them.

They were leaders and their people always came first, but perhaps Lexa had been right in denying them this one thing.

When Lexa pulled away with a deep breath, Clarke didn't stop her. She thought she saw relief flashing in the Commander's eyes.

"Are you ready to go back?" Lexa asked, goosebumps rising on the naked skin of her shoulders.

"Yeah."

They awkwardly moved to gather up their clothes and the rapidly cooling air made Clarke shiver. With every piece of clothing she put back on, her relaxed mood disappeared. She grabbed Lexa's jacket without a word and exchanged it with the one she'd been wearing - the one that no longer smelled like Alpha and wouldn't protect her now that she was clean.

By the time they were both re-dressed, Clarke's mind was back in Mount Weather and with the people that relied on her.

Chapter End Notes
Remember, Lexa, if your erection hasn't gone down in four hours, consult a doctor. (...maybe not Abby, though.)
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

In which Lexa is being a bit of a dickhead, Murphy is back in all his glory and Gustus...oh Gustus.

Chapter Notes

So this is where my chapter structure kinda fell apart because every scene turned out to be twice as long as intended. So think of this chapter and the next as a two-piece.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was the next day that saw Octavia arrive back in TonDC with Lincoln in tow. His face was still gaunt and pale beneath his hastily smeared-on war paint, though he had shaved off his beard in the meantime and looked far better than when they'd first brought him back from the precipice of death.

Clarke hadn't seen Lexa all day. Her mother had finally declared the Commander fit for duty and the Alpha had taken the chance to go off with Indra and a few of her warriors to train. Clarke hadn't gotten an invitation and she would have had to decline anyway. As curious as she was to see just how Grounders honed their combat skills, a group of sweaty Alphas trying to prove their dominance was the best way to get her into a situation she didn't want to be in.

"Octavia, Lincoln, come with me."

She jerked her head towards the hut her and Lexa had claimed for the time being. There was talk of them being moved to a hut more befitting the Commander's status, now that Lexa's injury had healed, but for the moment it was still theirs and Clarke felt secure enough in the knowledge they wouldn't be overheard.

She'd tell Lexa about any and all plans they came up with, but only once she was sure they had merit.

Octavia's eyes narrowed slightly at her tone, one hand going to Lincoln's back to support him. Clarke would have liked to give him a chance to recover from the journey, but Lexa planned on having a banquet in honour of their new-found peace in the evening and that meant she needed to have a waterproof plan in time for the strategy meetings that would undoubtedly begin tomorrow.

And if Lincoln was anything like Lexa, Clarke suspected he would not take too kindly to being seen as weak by anyone other than Octavia.

They entered the building and Octavia immediatly led Lincoln to Lexa's cot, easing him down onto the bedding. He grimaced at the smell. The cot reeked of Alpha and the raise of his eyebrow above knowing eyes let her know that he could tell her and Lexa hadn't mated. As the only Grounder Alpha truly mated to an Omega, he was no doubt more sensitive to the changes a mated Alpha's scent went through. He had to be, since the other Grounders had yet to notice - or voice - that Clarke
"Before you interrogate him," Octavia began. "There's something you need to know. Raven managed to get a radio signal from Mount Weather. It was a message from Jasper."

Clarke swallowed, biting her tongue. "Are they...are they alright?"

They'd been held up here for two weeks. The Mountain Men could have bled and killed all of her friends in that time, maybe even worse.

Octavia's eyes softened. "They're fine, for now. It was an automatic message, so we couldn't answer, but they're alive. Raven's working on it."

Clarke let out a shuddering breath at the relief coursing through her. They weren't too late. They still had a chance.

"Good. That's good. But we still need to talk about Lincoln's time in the mountain."

"Okay, but make it short," Octavia said, eyeing Lincoln worriedly. It was striking, the difference between a truly mated couple like them an this farce Clarke kept up with the Commander.

They weren't all over each other like some couples Clarke had seen over the years, but they were steadfast. Secure in the feelings they shared.

She rubbed at the dull ache in her chest and wondered if she and Finn could have been that sort of couple if everything had turned out differently. In another life.

"Lincoln, do you remember anything about Mount Weather? How you got there, what they did to you?"

He stayed silent for long moments, staring at the floor. Octavia's palm against the back of his neck made him swallow and look up to meet Clarke's eyes.

"Everything. The drug they gave me affects a great many things, but not memory. It doesn't have to."

Clarke nodded. The Mountain Men didn't have to care about what the Reapers knew, not when they could be sure they wouldn't ever come back from their blood-crazed hunger - or die in the process.

"So you would know how to get into Mount Weather if it became necessary?"

Lincoln shook his head in the affirmative, although a barely noticeable shudder went through his tall frame.

Octavia took a step towards her. "Why are you asking this? I told you, he's not going back in there."

"I'm not planning on it. Bellamy said he might be able to infiltrate Mount Weather. Give us a man on the inside."

"You want to send my brother into that hellpit?" Octavia bared her teeth, reminding Clarke uncannily of an Alpha.

Clarke stared her down, willing her to keep a cool head. It was easier with an Omega like Octavia. Between them, their designation didn't mean anything. All that counted was who had the stronger will or the thicker skull.

"No, I don't. It's dangerous and I want to keep him out of danger just as much as you do. That's why
I had you fetch Lincoln. To devise another plan."

Her calm, rational explanation had the desired effect on Octavia - she stood down, shoulders lowering into a more relaxed pose. "Right, sorry for going off on you like that."

"It's fine."

Lincoln, who had been content to sit back and let them settle their differences between them, piped up. "I do know my way through the mines. But their security is airtight. The only way in are the doors and those only open when they collect their prizes from the Reapers. There's a chute for the corpses, but there's no way to open them from the outside."

Clarke remembered the doors and the chute and she was inclined to agree. Nothing got through that solid steel door unless it was opened from within.

"If you do consider sending in Bellamy," he began, sending an apologetic look towards Octavia. "Be aware that the ones the Reapers catch are divided into two groups. Harvest and the Cerberus Project."
"The ones they bleed and the ones they turn into Reapers," Clarke said, shaking off the memory of the Harvest Chamber. Hundreds of Grounders, locked into cages barely big enough to turn in.

"Exactly. They only pick Alphas for the Cerberus Project, and even then they only take the ones they think might survive the drug."

"If there is any chance of Bellamy going through the same thing as Lincoln, you absolutely cannot let him anywhere near those people." Octavia caught Clarke's arm in her grip, watching her imploringly. "No matter what he says, he wouldn't be able to come back from that."

Clarke looked to Lincoln for input.

"There is a chance they might pick him," he said with a wince. "He's smaller than what they usually like in their Alphas, but if they feel threatened by our new alliance they might think it necessary to grow their armies in the mines."

His expression darkened. "I don't know what the drug will do to someone of his stature. I've only ever seen male Reapers, all of them tall and broad, so it could be that the drug will simply kill him. If it doesn't, it might cause lasting damage - damage even your mother can't heal."

"That's bullshit," Octavia spat. "Having a slight advantage is not worth my brother's life."

"We have to consider all the options, but that's all they are. Options," Clarke insisted. "Lincoln was there and he's our best shot at thinking of something else to give us an edge."

He took her cue and rose. "I'll see if I can remember anything else." His large palm descended on Octavia's shoulder. "And I'll try and keep your brother out of it, I promise."

Clarke just hoped that Lexa and her Generals would come up with a plan that didn't make it necessary to sacrifice anyone. Above all, she hoped she wouldn't end up sending another friend to their death.

Just before Octavia followed Lincoln out the door, she stopped short.

"By the way," she said, reaching into the heavy-looking bag at her hip. "I got you your book."

Clarke had almost forgotten about that.
She took the proffered item, weighing it in her hands. The book was large and heavy and she was pleased to see a multitude of pictures as she thumbed through it. Unlike most other books they'd had on the Ark, this one looked like it had never been read. Not surprising, as most of them didn't feel the need to read about the very thing they were surrounded by every day of their lives.

"Whatever you need that doorstopper for, I hope it's worth it. It was a bitch carrying it all the way here," Octavia sighed, rotating her shoulders.

Clarke thanked her absent-mindedly, still engrossed in the pages before her.

When the door opened, Clarke only wasted a cursory glance on the figure - she had no problem recognizing Lexa's scent when she smelled it -, preferring instead to keep mulling over the piece of paper in front of her. Lincoln had been able to draw up a make-shift map of the mineshafts leading into Mount Weather.

It wasn't ideal since he hadn't exactly been in the right state of mind to memorize all the winding passages, but Clarke had been trying to align it with her own memories of her escape for the past hour or so and had made at least some progress.

"Clarke, are you ready to go?"

"Hmm?"

She finally looked up from her task and frowned when the Commander's face came into view. It sported a nasty bruise just above her right cheekbone, the dark purple smudge running all the way down to her jaw.

"Looks like you took a beating," Clarke mused, studying the injury from where she was sitting on the cot. She often found herself occupying Lexa's bed when the Commander wasn't present, but didn't think too hard on it. Her inner Omega was happy being so close to an Alpha's scent and unlike the real thing, the sleepy, protective colour of it helped Clarke calm down and concentrate.

The Alpha's nose twitched at the insinuation, but she merely shrugged and reached for the pieces of her armour laid out neatly on the table.

"My warriors are on edge from the long wait," she explained shortly.

Lexa had taken a bath after her training, Clarke could tell, but the injury had obviously gone unheeded. Experience told her that bruises like that liked to swell up rapidly if they weren't cooled properly.

She wondered if Lexa expected her to take care of it. Under any other circumstances, there wouldn't be any question that it was the duty of an Alpha's mate to soothe their aches and pains, but this wasn't a traditional union.

Clarke had taken care of the Commander while she'd recuperated from her arrow wound, but there was quite a bit of difference between a possibly life-threatening injury and a simple bruise.

With a shake of her head, Clarke folded the map in her hands and stowed it away in her bag where the book she'd requested from Octavia was already resting.

She opened the first-aid kit next to it and rummaged around until she found the rectangular, blue package she was looking for. With a quick squeeze the pad began to cool considerably and she held it out to the Commander.
"It's an instant cold pack," she explained quietly at the Alpha's questioning glance. "It'll cool your face. To keep it from swelling."

Lexa's eyes flicked from Clarke's to the small pack in her hand before she hesitantly reached out, fingers jerking back when they touched the cold surface.

"It's not gonna bite," Clarke commented dryly.

The Commander finally accepted the item and let out a barely audible sigh when it touched the side of her face.

"I'm guessing it's time for the banquet?" Clarke asked, knowing that Lexa wouldn't be here if she didn't need her for something.

Lexa nodded matter-of-factly, although her usually professional demeanor suffered somewhat from the bright blue cold pack pressed against her cheek.

"It is," she said, lowering the pad for a moment. "But before we go, you need to be aware of a few things."

The Alpha averted her eyes. "Since this is your first official appearance as my mate, my people, especially my Generals," she said, the words stuttering to a temporary stop as she swallowed harshly and lowered her voice to a murmur. "They will expect you to pay deference to me."

A beat passed as realization dawned.

Clarke drew in a quick breath and stepped back, her arms tensing and a cold shiver running down her spine. "And you want me to act the part of the dutiful Omega wife."

Lexa's squared shoulders and raised chin answered her question better than any words ever could.

Clarke nodded stiffly, the material of Lexa's jacket on her skin suddenly itchy and uncomfortable. "Don't worry, I won't embarrass you."

Lexa raised her hand as if to reach for her arm as Clarke made to walk past, but let it fall just as quickly.

"My position is a fragile one at the moment, Clarke. They have to accept me as a strong and consequent leader in all things. If they suspect that I can't control my mate, they won't believe that I can control them."

Control.

The words cut deep and Clarke cursed herself for being surprised by them in the first place. After all was said and done, Lexa was still an Alpha. As lax as she'd been when it was just the two of them, Clarke should have known it wouldn't last.

She'd been kidding herself, thinking there might come a day they could call each other equals. The power balance between them was inherently skewered.

"I don't want to force you into this role." Lexa began, green eyes looking far too apologetic for Clarke to look into them.

Clarke cut her off with a sharp jerk of her head. "Save it, Commander. I knew what I was getting myself into when I offered myself to you."
The Alpha swallowed, but didn't disagree. Clarke would always be seen as a commodity, in one way or another, and they both knew it.

Lexa followed her out of the door with slow steps, the cold pack lying forgotten on the table.

Her mother and Kane were already waiting for them as they made their way towards the large house in the center of the village. One that served for meetings such as this, Clarke guessed.

Lexa greeted both of them with a short nod, but didn't stop. "Join me as soon as you are ready," she said as she whirled past them, keeping her tense shoulders turned away from Clarke at all times.

Being ignored did nothing to soothe Clarke's irritation.

Abby looked between Clarke and the retreating Alpha's back, the corners of her mouth pulling down at the smell of anger wafting between them.

Kane seemed similarly concerned, although he kept himself wisely in the background.

"Is everything alright? If you need anything..." Abby said, reaching out to run a hand over Clarke's cheek.

"I'm fine, Mom," Clarke cut her off with a wince. "Let's get this over with."

Once again, she left her mother to trail after her as she made to enter the building.

Almost everyone of importance had already gathered inside. Predictably, Grounders and Arkers stood on opposite sides of the long table, warily staring each other down.

Only Octavia and Lincoln stood apart from the others in a more neutral zone towards the far side of the room. Indra was curiously absent.

Clarke sent Kane and her mother a coaxing look and the two of them joined the others. She was pleased to see Nyko giving her mother a respectful nod as she took up her place across from him.

"Clarke."

Lexa reached out her hand for Clarke to take, though her eyes kept stubbornly fixating a spot just behind her shoulder.

Clarke swallowed down her pride and laid her palm against the Commander's, attempting to dispel the unease from her face. Lexa's skin was warm as she carefully gripped her fingers and led her to their seats.

Gustus stood to Lexa's right, as always, his eyes carefully cataloguing every possible outside threat.

What was more surprising was Murphy leaning against the wall behind Clarke's seat. They had brought him as a mock chaperone, at least originally, but it wasn't like Murphy to remember - or care - about it.

Unless he was here on Lexa's behalf, to serve as a reminder of Clarke's obedience - the perfect Omega mate who only sought the company of her ilk.

Her stomach roiled at the thought.

"I thank you all for attending," Lexa spoke up once they all had found their positions. "While our plans have unfortunately been waylaid, we will not be stopped from doing what we must to get our people back."
The Alpha raised their interlocked hands slightly. "As of the moment my mate and I entered into this union, we became one people." Her sharp green eyes wandered over her assembled warriors, lingering on Quint for a tense moment. "And this feast shall mark a day of celebration. A celebration of peace and a celebration of war. May this day be the start of our victory over the Mountain."

As the warriors responded with enthusiastic hoots and the Arkers clapped in agreement, Clarke inconspicuously slipped her fingers out of Lexa's warm grip.

She'd kept her head down during the speech, chin tucked in, just like a proper Omega would, and the discomfort of the act burned through her back.

Out of the corner of her eyes, she caught a glimpse of Lexa's hand twitching before balling into a fist. She couldn't smell whether it was anger or regret producing the reaction, not in a room filled with too many scents to distinguish them all.

"You may speak to your people if you wish," the Commander whispered just loud enough for her to hear and Clarke's humiliation multiplied. She may?

She was about to respond when the door burst open and hit the wall with a disruptive bang.

The sound caused the Grounders around them to draw their weapons, watching the entrance nervously.

Clarke would have relaxed at the sight of Indra if it hadn't been for the entourage of glowering Grounders walking in behind her and the murder shining in her eyes.

"Sis em op!"

The men and women behind Indra began to swarm the room and Grounders and Arkers alike swiveled their heads in confusion. Clarke looked to Lexa, but her furrowed brows told her she was just as clueless about Indra's plans as everyone else.

"Indra. Chit ste disha?" Lexa hissed, hand going to the dagger strapped to her hip.

But Indra's focus wasn't on her. The dark-skinned woman's eyes were focused firmly to the Commander's right - on Gustus.

Indra said only one word as her warriors used the confusion of the moment to grab the large man's arms and force him to the ground, despite his grunts of protest.

"Natrona."

"Natrona? Lexa, what does that mean?" Clarke asked, looking down at the bodyguard's face pressed into the dirt.

Lexa was strangely pale as she answered, her eyes twitching between Gustus' stony expression, the hands holding him down and the rest of the room. "Traitor. It means traitor."

"Are you fucking kidding me? That guy, a traitor?" Murphy snarled and shook his head, leaving his position against the far wall to stroll closer to Clarke. "You can't seriously believe that."

Clarke held up her hand to stop his speech. The room had been cleared of almost everyone, the table and chairs moved to one side to make more space.

Only Lexa and Indra remained of the Grounders after the rest of them had hauled Gustus away to
keep him away from the Commander for the time being.

Kane had convinced her mother to leave as well, with Lincoln and Bellamy following closely behind.

Octavia was here as Indra's second and Murphy looked too pissed-off to go anywhere, and Clarke would rather avoid unnecessary confrontations as long as Lexa didn't ask them to leave.

"What exactly happened?" she asked after it became apparent that Lexa wouldn't be the one to start the conversation, forgetting her own irritation in favour of concentrating on more important matters.

Indra blinked at her, but answered in the Commander's direction. "We found evidence that it was him who was responsible for the attempt on your life, Heda."

The muscles in Lexa's jaw fluttered and tensed underneath taut skin. "What evidence?"

Her tone was clipped and professional, the unease rolling off of her in waves. It was more troubled than Clarke had ever seen her.

"His bow," Indra answered, taking the weapon off her back and presenting it to the Commander. "My warriors have tracked the attacker to his camp. He must have known we were coming. He fled, but we found this among his possessions."

Lexa traced a finger down the bows' wood before her hand closed around it in a white-knuckled grip. Clarke didn't ask whether they were sure the weapon belonged to Gustus, not when the recognition on Lexa's face was plain as day.

Murphy wasn't quite as astute.

"How the hell do you know it's his? And even if it was, he was right there when she got shot!"

"It's his bow," Indra repeated, glowering at his audacity. "A warrior does not part from his weapon willingly, especially not one as fine as this."

Murphy's face turned red in anger. "Then why should he give his weapon away? It'd be plain stupid."

Clarke narrowed her eyes at his defensively pulled up shoulders. He wasn't usually the type to stick up for anyone but himself, much less a Grounder. She knew Gustus had been keeping an eye on him when he could, but gratitude had never been one of Murphy's strong suits.

"Payment, of course," the Chief hissed. "Assassinating the Commander would mean a fate worse than death. Only a fool or someone who has been paid very well would dare attempt it."

"Would any of your warriors really be willing to kill you for nothing but a bow?" Clarke asked calmly in Lexa's direction. The Alpha hadn't participated in the conversation until now, but her eyes were as attentive as ever.

Clarke hadn't yet seen much evidence of greed amongst the Grounders, but she remembered what Lexa had told her about the rivalries between the tribes - rivalries based on who possessed the most and who wanted to take it from them. For all she knew, their desire for expanding their territory was just the beginning.

"While it is a very valuable weapon, no, mere greed would not be motivation enough." Lexa delicately placed the bow on a table, as if she was afraid she'd break it - or afraid she'd want to. Her
expression was aloof as she folded her arms behind her back. "If the opposition to my leadership was big enough, however, they might think the risk worthwhile."

"Don't you people have some kind of honour code or something? Something that says back-stabbing is bad?" Murphy spat, crossing his arms over his chest. Octavia winced and Indra's eyes shot daggers at him, though the Commander hardly seemed to notice his disrespect.

"Challenging me in combat would be the traditional way to strip me of my position, but more cunning methods have also been employed in the past. As Commander, it is expected of me to be aware of my surroundings at all times. A successful assassination attempt would mean I have failed my duty."

The explanation was delivered with a straight face, though Clarke wondered how much pressure had to rest on her. Lexa was barely older than her, barely more than a teenager, she remembered, and they were asking her to - no, were expecting her to - treat attempts on her life as nothing more than challenges to be conquered.

"Fucking hell," Murphy snarled and threw his hands up. "The dude would cut off his own leg before endangering his precious fucking Commander and you-"

"Mind your place, boy!"

The sharp edge of a sword suddenly pressed into his neck, a thin vein of anger pulsing in Indra's forehead. Octavia had taken a step forward, but was looking between them uncertainly, fingers twitching.

"Indra, back down." To Clarke's surprise, the harsh words had come out of her own mouth. They didn't have time to deal with Murphy, not now, and she'd already seen enough blood spilled for a lifetime. "He'll mind his tongue from now on."

Murphy huffed, but she didn't miss the drop of sweat running down his temple or the bobbing of his throat when the cold metal retreated from his skin just enough to allow him to breathe. Indra, for her part, tightened her grip around the handle of her sword and glanced at Lexa for input.

Clarke swallowed as she did the same and her gaze met Lexa's. The Alpha had told her to act submissive in public, in front of her generals, and what Clarke had just done was the exact opposite of a docile Omega's reaction.

A good Omega would have stood there with her head lowered and let other people decide. Clarke had told Indra off without asking for Lexa's permission first and by law, Lexa had every right to reprimand her - or worse, if she so desired.

She didn't. The Commander's eyes were wide and glassy, but there was no anger in them, no disappointment or resentment.

All Clarke saw was a hint of surprise and that same odd shimmer she'd noticed before, when she'd bandaged her wound.

"Do as she says," Lexa ordered, not taking her eyes off Clarke even as Indra sheathed her sword with a low grumble.

"He's got a point, much as I hate to admit it," Octavia piped up unexpectedly. "From what I've seen, Gustus takes the Commander's safety very seriously. Why do it now?"

A beat passed before Clarke blinked and stopped short. "He wasn't trying to kill her."
She should have thought about it sooner, but she hadn't considered...

"What are you talking about? You were the one who pulled the arrow out of her shoulder." Indra gestured towards the Commander's almost-healed injury.

"Exactly, her shoulder."

Clarke strolled over to Lexa and took hold of her, pointing to where the entry wound had been.

"The arrow punched right through, without damaging bone or the rotator cuff. It's an incredibly shallow wound for something that's supposed to kill her." She drew an invisible line to demonstrate the path of the arrow. "If Gustus had paid someone to shoot you, wouldn't he have chosen someone with the skills to pull it off? Doing no damage at all requires a lot of precision or an insane amount of luck."

Lexa's brow furrowed, lips pressing together in hesitation. A vulnerable spark of hope in her eyes told Clarke that she wanted to believe her.

"He wasn't trying to kill you," Clarke repeated, looking up at her imploringly. "He was trying to break our union, possibly the alliance."

Indra scoffed. "And what would he have hoped to accomplish by injuring the Commander?"

"Simple," Clarke answered, stepping out of the Alpha's private space before it became uncomfortable or she could get distracted by her scent. "When Lexa got hurt, your warriors blamed us. They held me responsible for almost causing her death because she agreed to marry me. If Lexa hadn't stepped in before things could escalate with Quint, we would have had a fight on our hands and the alliance might have broken down before it could really start."

Lexa's eyes lit up in understanding, the cogs behind her pupils starting to turn as she grasped the situation. Indra merely puffed out an annoyed breath and didn't comment.

"So he didn't try to kill her," Murphy said, clutching his elbows uncomfortably. "That means he doesn't have to die, right?"

Octavia squinted at him suspiciously. "Just why the heck are you so concerned about this anyway?"

He ground his teeth and spat on the ground, not deigning to answer the question.

"It doesn't matter whether it was his intention or not, his actions could have resulted in the Commander's demise. And treason is punishable by death."

Indra's grim voice quieted down on the last few words and Clarke wondered whether Lexa wasn't the only one about to lose a friend.

She threw a quick glance over her shoulder. Lexa still stood there, throat bobbing shallowly, and Clarke asked herself whether words of comfort would help or hinder her.

Before she had a chance to decide, Lexa pressed her eyes closed and breathed in sharply. When she opened them again, they had a sheen of steel to them.

"Regardless of intention or motive, the evidence speaks for itself. Gustus has been found guilty of treason against me and his own people and thus shall suffer death by a thousand cuts."

Lexa made to storm past her out the door, but Clarke caught her elbow in a firm hold.
"Before you do anything you regret," she began in a quiet murmur, trying to keep their conversation as private as possible. Indra and Octavia started up a muffled conversation of their own in a show of respect, while Murphy's ears grew by about three sizes in an attempt to eavesdrop. Clarke lowered her voice further in response. "Are you sure it was really him? I can't say I know him, but I've never gotten the impression he would ever hurt you, in any way."

Lexa's stony expression didn't soften, although she blinked rapidly once, then twice, and Clarke knew this was as close to an admission of regret as the Commander would allow herself.

"No matter what I believe, the case is clear. Without the bowman, there is no one who can confirm his innocence and our traditions, our ways, must be upheld." Her throat quivered. "Gustus will die today, and there is nothing I can do to stop it - even if I wanted to."

Her arm slid out of Clarke's grasp and she disappeared through the door, the metal hinges squeaking ominously in her wake. Out of the corners of her eyes, Clarke saw Murphy open and close his mouth before he finally let out a breath and hung his head.

Chapter End Notes

Trigedasleng:

"Chit ste disha?" = "What is this?/What is happening?"
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

In which Murphy has a confession to make and Clarke and Lexa clear the air.

They had already strapped Gustus to a tree trunk in the center of the village by the time their talk had concluded. He’d been stripped of his weapons, his armour and his jacket, leaving him vulnerable in nothing but a ratty shirt and pants.

Murphy fidgeted in his place just behind Clarke, biting the inside of his cheek.

The crowd that had formed around the Grounder looked up and parted when Lexa strolled forward, Clarke close on her heels.

They came to a stop right before the large man.

If Clarke had expected anger or fear in the twists of his expression, even remorse, she’d been wrong. For all that he had to be expecting this sentence, Gustus never once flinched or turned his eyes away from the Commander, even as she broke the tense silence with the sharp, metallic clang of her dagger sliding out of its scabbard.

"You have been accused of treason. Is there anything you wish to say in your defense?" Lexa's voice carried easily across the heads of the crowd and the hand gripping the hilt of her dagger was strong and steady, but Clarke saw it. She saw the frantic bobbing of her throat, the faint tremors shaking her shoulders, even the sheen of wetness gathering at the edge of her eyes.

Clarke had had weeks to get used to the subtle nuances of expressions the Alpha never quite allowed herself to form, but she knew that if it were any other situation, any other person on that tree, she would not be able to spot anything but sheer determination in the lines of Lexa's profile.

The question garnered no response from the bound man, his grim face remaining as rigid as stone. His silence confirmed their suspicions far surer than any words could and the shaking of Lexa's spine intensified.

Disregarding their earlier dispute, at least for the moment, Clarke inched closer to the Alpha, offering the silent support she wasn't entirely sure the Commander even wanted.

Lexa's form steadied, her back straightening until her chin was held proud once more.

"You have been found guilty, natrona. And thus your sentence is death." The words rang through the crowd like a gunshot. A steady chant rose through the Grounders as Lexa stepped forward and placed the tip of her knife across Gustus' upper arm, drawing a deep, bloody line down his skin.

She didn't need to give verbal permission for her warriors to take up the torture in her wake. The moment the Commander had left the immediate circle of the trunk, the Grounders swarmed the man with their weapons drawn, slicing and cutting at every inch of skin they could find.

It was a gruesome display, made all the more severe by the Alpha's wide eyes taking in the spectacle. Her eyes weren't glazed or unfocused and she didn't look away, not once.
Clarke knew that look, had worn it herself more times than she cared to count.

Because when you couldn't save those that mattered most, all you could do was ingrain their memory into your mind and hope you did not wake up one day to find that you'd forgotten to care.

It was a pain no one could take away and Clarke didn't try. All she could do was stand by Lexa's side and hope it would be accepted.

Murphy had turned away, staring at the ground with crossed arms and clenched teeth. "This is bullshit," he mumbled, over and over again, gnawing at the nail of his thumb. "Bullshit bullshit bullshit."

When the Grounders were finally satisfied and backed away, the once so proud Beta had been reduced to a mass of mottled, bloody flesh. Not a single inch of skin had been left untouched by the blades and his breath went fast and wheezing.

As one of the warriors readied his bow, Clarke looked to the Commander. Lexa answered before she could pose the question, a monotonous drone that made her wince. "He will be repayed with the same pain he has bestowed upon others before he can be granted the peace of death."

Clarke swallowed, watching as others followed suit and trained their weapons on Gustus. Even if they aimed for non-vital parts, at this distance the force of entry would crush his bones.

If it wasn't the blood loss or the impact that killed him, it would be the vicious barbs carved into bone arrowheads and the additional damage they would no doubt do to his internal organs.

Clarke's breath caught in her throat, dread coiling in her chest.

Barbs.

All of them, every single arrow, had barbs. They gleamed a faded white in the pale autumn sun, but it came from bone, not from metal, not like-

"Lexa, are any of your arrows made from metal?"

The Alpha only paid very little attention to her seemingly inconsequential question. "No. Bone is a far more available ressource," she answered absentmindedly.

Clarke whirled around without further comment and approached Murphy in big steps, grabbing him by the front of his jacket. The Commander tensed at her sudden disappearance, but did not look back.

"I need you to stop them from killing him until I'm back," she whispered sharply once Murphy's startled eyes had focused on her. "Whatever happens, keep him alive. I'll need a few minutes."

For once, Murphy did not protest or question her orders. He simply gulped and nodded gravely.

With everyone's attention focused on the execution in their midst, no one thought to question her when Clarke slipped from the crowd, her boots pounding against the hard-packed earth as she ran through the village.

She didn't bother preserving the building's integrity and simply crashed through the door of the hut she'd been sharing with Lexa, looking around frantically as her harsh breathing echoed against the walls.
She knew she'd kept it, thrown carelessly onto the table, she knew she'd-

It was still there. A trembling fist closed around the shaft of the arrow that had pierced Lexa's shoulder as Clarke inspected it.

Metal. Smooth, too neatly-crafted metal without barbs, without the subtle imperfections of something truly handmade.

Clarke tore back out the door.

The village centre was a confused mess when she came back. Murphy stood with his arms slightly spread in front of a slumped-over and barely conscious Gustus, sporting the beginnings of a brand-new black eye.

A couple of Grounders had grabbed a flabbergasted Bellamy by the shoulders, her mother and Kane looked completely out of the loop and Lexa stood rooted to the spot with her hands clenching in suppressed anger.

Clarke didn't know what Murphy had done and she didn't have the time to find out, not so long as it had worked.

All heads swiveled to face her as she approached and the colourful blend of confusion, suspicion and plain disgust hanging in the air made her regret leaving Murphy in charge of distraction.

She ignored the strained silence and walked straight towards the Commander. The scorching ire that met her when Lexa looked her way almost made her miss a step, but she continued undeterred until she could hold out the arrow in her grasp for everyone to see.

The Alpha blinked and breathed deeply at the unexpected move, the heat in her gaze receeding as she forced her hands to relax.

"This is the arrow they shot you with," Clarke said, loud enough to carry over the assembled Grounders and Arkers alike. "And it's not one of yours."

The Commander took the projectile between her fingers, studying it.

"It's a metal arrowhead," Clarke elaborated for everyone else. "No barbs and too symmetrical to have been made by hand."

She waited for realization to spark before continuing. "The one who shot you was not a Grounder. Whoever was responsible must have used his bow on purpose to make it seem like a Grounder did it, but Gustus is innocent."

Lexa didn't waste time. Her yelled-out orders and the wall of Alpha dominance oozing from her pores caused the people around them to scramble and hurry to unbind the man from the trunk.

Gustus' broad-shouldered frame slumped to the ground without the ropes to hold him upright and even Indra avoided looking at the twitching mess that was his face.

The same people that had been willing to cut and bleed him to death just minutes prior now worked together to lift him up and off the ground, supporting him as they carried him off into a nearby building.

"Will he survive his wounds?" Clarke asked, watching the Grounders disappear through the door, Nyko among them.
Lexa shook her head. "Perhaps, if he makes it through the night."

Clarke caught her mother's eyes. Abby nodded at the unspoken suggestion and hurried after Nyko.

The Commander watched the silent exchange. Clarke had expected a sense of relief, even an expression of gratitude, but Lexa merely stared, an unfamiliar slant to the arch of her brows.

When she turned around to stalk off - without a word, without so much as a nod of acknowledgement - Clarke bristled.

She hadn't gone out of her way to save Gustus for gratitude. She hadn't done it for Lexa, not strictly, but a part of her felt like she ought to have gotten something for her efforts. The cold shoulder certainly hadn't been what she'd been expecting.

As the crowd dispersed and Clarke stared after her 'wife' with a dark glower, Bellamy approached her, pulling Murphy with him by the scruff of his neck.

Clarke breathed in deeply to dispel the sense of disappointment at the Alpha's lack of reaction and turned to face them.

Bellamy placed himself a good, proper distance from her and pushed Murphy into position between them.

"What's the matter?" Clarke asked, gesturing towards the carefully established distance.

Bellamy scoffed. "Ask him."

Murphy puffed out his cheeks, averting his gaze and not responding, and Clarke fixed him with an inquisitive glare.

"What did he do?"

"I don't know what he was supposed to do," Bellamy started, shifting uncomfortably under the lingering looks of some of the villagers. "But Murphy here thought it would be a good idea to tell the Commander that you've been screwing around behind her back. With me."

Clarke sighed heavily, resisting the urge to massage her temples. "Wonderful."

The Grounders had already had their suspicions anyway and now Murphy went and confirmed it for them, as absurd as the concept was for Clarke and Bellamy both.

It would explain Lexa's dismissive behaviour, at the very least. If Bellamy was right and the Commander's instincts were more attached to Clarke than she let on, her inner Alpha probably wasn't particularly happy at the moment.

It wasn't her problem, Clarke reminded herself. Lexa had decided all on her own that mating her was out of the question and now they both had to live with the consequences. She had no right to be angry.

"It worked, okay?" Murphy hissed. "You told me to keep them distracted 'til you got back and I did. Don't piss on me for doing what you asked."

There was no point arguing against it; the mess was made. And he was right about one point - it had worked. They'd spared a man from being killed for a crime he hadn't committed.

And yet that was just a single drop in an ocean of issues they had yet to face.
"Bellamy."

He perked up at the weighty tone of her voice. Clarke deliberated her decision for only a moment, sending a silent apology to Octavia, before she voiced her thoughts. "Be prepared to infiltrate Mount Weather at a moment's notice."

He opened his mouth and furrowed his brow before simply nodding his head. "I will. You know I will. But why the change of heart?"

"The arrow. It wasn't a Grounder who shot her and I don't think it was one of us. We can't be sure, but the only other people who would profit from breaking our alliance..."

"...are the Mountain Men," he finished for her.

She nodded. "The attack wasn't overt and their goal wasn't to kill Lexa, not yet, but if they're willing to go this far, that means this alliance is starting to unsettle them. They're getting anxious, nervous."

"And it won't be long until they start bleeding our friends," Bellamy muttered.

"If it really was them. And if they're not already doing it."

He swallowed and breathed out harshly. "I'll go find Octavia," he said, already turning on his heel. "And have a talk with Lincoln."

He strode away and it left Clarke standing alone with Murphy. He'd been largely quiet until now and she preferred not to test her good luck. She'd barely taken one step towards her hut when he jerked and started sputtering.

"Wait, I-"

He stopped at her raised eyebrows and dragged sweaty fingers through his messy hair. "Fuck. FUCK. Listen, it wasn't- it wasn't one of ours, okay? It was definitely one of the assholes from the Mountain."

He avoided looking at her. He avoided looking at anything apart from the tip of his boot carving grooves into the ground.

Clarke's eyes narrowed dangerously. "What did you do, Murphy?" she spat out from between clenched teeth. "What did you do?"

There was no competition for dominance among Omegas, not usually, because the only difference that counted was whether you had an Alpha mate to call your own, whether you stood under someone's protection or not, but her words made him flinch regardless.

"I didn't set the Commander up to be shot, if that's what you're asking," he muttered, pulling his shoulders up to his ears. "I just- fuck, I was drunk the other night, okay? You all saw it. And, and your Commander's bodyguard was busy staring daggers at you and I figured it'd be funny to steal the big guy's weapon while he wasn't looking."

Anger made the back of Clarke's neck prickle as he continued, his shoulders drooping inward like he was preparing to curl in on himself.

"So I grabbed his bow and ran - hell, I don't even know where I ran. Into the forest, probably. It was dark and I thought I was being really fucking funny. I knew there was someone, but I figured it was just Bellamy coming to drag me back or make sure I wasn't about to start any shit."
His voice grew quieter when one of the Grounders drew nearer and Clarke wasn't sure whether she should allow him to.

"I didn't see their face, but they were wearing a hazmat suit. So they conked me over the head or I- I fell asleep or something. I can't remember. All I know is, when I woke up, the bow was gone."

He hurried to add, "I didn't know why they'd steal a goddamn bow until today. So I figured it wasn't gonna be a problem. It's not like the Grounders don't have more than enough weapons to replace this one. I didn't think they'd use it to blame this shit on someone else."

His explanation came to a close, but his eyes still fixated his boots, his fingers fumbling with his elbows.

Clarke took a deep breath, for once grateful for Murphy's subdued Omega smell. It made it easier not to yell her next words.

"Why didn't you say anything?" she asked, the harsh inflection creeping into her voice making her sound low and threatening. "Why tell me this now? Why tell me this at all?"

He'd had a chance to keep this all from happening and he hadn't taken it. Telling her now was of no help to anyone, much less him.

Murphy blew out a harsh breath. "Because no one would have fucking believed me, okay? We both know I'm not exactly the most trustworthy guy around."

Clarke pressed her teeth together, but he was right. If he'd confessed earlier, with no evidence to his claim but his words, chances were they might have ignored him at best and accused him of protecting a traitor at worst.

"What do you want from me, Murphy?" she sighed, exhaustion making the back of her eyes pound. "If you're looking for someone to absolve you of your sins, I am the last person you should look to. I don't make the same mistake twice and you'll get no sympathy from me."

"I'm not looking for forgiveness and I'm sure as hell not looking for sympathy." He bared his teeth in a pitiful imitation of an Alpha growl, but it dropped as he threw a glance over his shoulder, towards the building they had taken Gustus to. "The dude just doesn't deserve having his commitment doubted. He's a shitload more loyal than any of us, that's for sure."

When she simply stared at him, his expression twisted into a snarl. "I fucking hate Grounders and that's not gonna change, okay, but he's a good person. He treats me decently and he's gotten the knotheads here to back off."

Clarke shook her head. She supposed even Murphy had to make the right choice at some point in his life.

"Are you-" He cleared his throat, his earlier bravado disappearing like a plume of smoke. "Are you gonna tell the Commander about it?"

She ought to. An Omega wasn't supposed to keep any secrets from their mate, and even if Clarke wasn't too fond of conforming to people's expectations, some might say Murphy deserved it. A part of her thought Murphy deserved it, some kind of punishment for all the pain he'd caused them, all the selfish mistakes he'd made.

"No," she said eventually. "I won't. She'd have to kill you and as much as you probably deserve it, you're more useful to me alive than dead."
She wasn't willing to exchange one execution for another and Murphy's death would help no one. It wouldn't bring back the people he'd killed and it wouldn't undo the wounds or scars Gustus would have to bear. It wouldn't make the loss Lexa had almost suffered be felt less keenly.

"It's not me or her you've done wrong. If you want to make things better, you should start with the man you almost got killed today."

Murphy's adams apple bobbed as he gulped and nodded. He didn't say anything more and Clarke wasn't inclined to bear more of his secrets as she walked away and left him to contemplate her suggestion.

Lexa stood staring out of the window motionlessly when Clarke entered. A light rain had started to fall, drumming a soothing rhythm against the roof of the small hut. The door hung oddly in its hinges from the earlier maltreatment and Clarke had to throw her body weight against it to get it to close all the way.

Despite the noise, the Commander didn't move. Clarke watched her wordlessly for a few long moments, anger churning in her gut and mixing with an unwelcome sense of sympathy. She shook off the latter.

"Gustus is gonna make it, but the wounds will take a while to heal. And he's going to have scars," she explained curtly, reciting what her mother had told her when she'd stopped by.

The Alpha's rigid spine shifted, but didn't relax. She remained utterly unresponsive and if Clarke hadn't been angry before, she was now.

Lexa had no right to hold anything Murphy had said against her, regardless of the fact that it had been an outrageous lie.

"Whatever you're trying to do, stop it," she said, crossing her arms over her chest. The Commander's shoulders jerked and her hands clenched into fists at her sides.

"I am not doing anything," Lexa muttered, pointedly not averting her eyes from the darkening window.

"I can smell your anger, Lexa."

It was potent and heady, creeping along the floorboards and walls to seep into every crack and furrow. It seeped into **Clarke** and she resisted rubbing her thighs together to relieve some of the sudden pressure the pheromones evoked in her.

"If this is about Bellamy-"

Lexa turned, slowly, and Clarke's breath caught at the tension in her furrowed brows, the flames licking at the edges of her dilated pupils. "As I have told you at the beginning of our union, it's not my business who you consort with. I don't wish to lay a claim on you."

Clarke was starkly reminded of their wedding night. Lexa had said the same thing then, had uttered the words with the same cold aloofness, but Clarke had spent weeks in her company and she spotted the little cues - a twitch of her jaw, a flicker of her pupils, nails digging into palms - that belied the Commander's words.

Under other circumstances, Clarke might have let it go. She might have ignored Lexa's anger and possessiveness as a simple side effect of her being an Alpha, accepted it as something to remain
unmentioned, but she was not in the mood for any more of her half-truths.

"If you truly meant that, this room wouldn't smell so angry." Her eyes fell on Lexa's hands. "You wouldn't be clutching the handle of your knife like you were preparing for a fight."

Immediately, the Commander swallowed and loosened her grip on the weapon. Clarke could see her trying to shove and pull her ire further inside herself, far enough to be hidden and avoided.

"My point stands," Lexa insisted quietly, fixating a spot above Clarke's head.

Carke huffed out a breath and gritted her teeth. "Unbelievable," she growled and turned on her heel. If Lexa wanted to be stubborn about this, it was her problem. Clarke wasn't about to go out of her way to try and talk to someone who refused to see sense.

She'd come back later, when the Commander had calmed down and they could pretend this whole conversation had never happened.

Just as her fingers touched the wood of the door, a strained sigh and a hesitant "Wait" stopped her short.

"Clarke, I-" Lexa shook herself as Clarke turned around, her shoulders dropping and her eyes softening. "I do mean it, what I said. I don't want to lay a claim on you and it's not my business who you decide to share your bed with. I don't have the right to govern that."

Her tone was gentle and earnest this time and some of the anger Clarke had been holding in drained from her belly.

"But it does make you angry," Clarke stated, leaning her hip against the edge of the table near the Alpha.

Lexa nodded hesitantly, fiddling with a loose thread on her shirt. "It's...difficult, sometimes, to dampen my initial reaction. Our close proximity of the last weeks has made it more challenging, but I do not mean for it to affect you."

Clarke wanted to scoff and tell her that her mere presence was enough to affect her, that even now she had trouble concealing the fact that there was a telling wetness building between her thighs, but most of all she was just relieved to know that she wasn't the only one struggling.

Omegas had been judged by their abilities to affect the Alphas around them for millennia and while it was an archaic concept, Clarke couldn't deny that it soothed her bruised ego to hear Lexa admit that she wasn't as unaffected as she liked to pretend.

"For better or worse, we're married," Clarke sighed out, rubbing at her upper arms to stave off some of the cold the rain was bringing. Winter was approaching rapidly and she was starting to feel it. "And whether you want to acknowledge it or not, it will stay that way for some time yet. Everything you do affects me in one way or another."

She contemplated stopping there, but felt something else needed to be said. "You've been leading these people by yourself since you were sixteen, but you're not alone anymore. We're in this together, at least for the time being and," she wavered, "I'd like to think we could be friendly with each other."

The Commander opened her mouth, but all that escaped was a long, drawn-out breath.

"I'm sorry," she finally rasped, catching and holding Clarke's eyes. "For earlier. I shouldn't have
asked you to pretend to be what you are not. If my people's loyalty strays, it is due to my actions and my behaviour, not yours."

Clarke sank down onto the cot, her legs feeling like lead now that the day was catching up to her and her tightly-held ire was starting to sizzle out. Outside, the pitter-patter of rain intensified and the rhythmic noise caused her eyelids to feel heavy.

"You have to look strong. Be strong. I get that," she said. Lexa approached the bed hesitantly and Clarke allowed her to sit beside her, albeit with the usual safety margin. As always, the proximity drew a flutter from her lower stomach, but the exhaustion, both mental and physical, dimmed the effect now that the Alpha no longer emitted fury.

"You were willing to kill Gustus," she muttered into the stillness, her shoulders relaxing as they listened to the raindrops. "Even though you didn't believe he was guilty."

Lexa stared at the palms of her hands. Clarke had noticed the scars there from time to time, but had never asked. Just like she'd never asked where the Commander was keeping Anya's braid, now that she wasn't wearing it on her wrist.

"I couldn't afford not to," the Alpha responded, running the tips of her fingers over the inside of her palms. "I can't allow myself to be swayed by personal feelings and my resolve must be absolute. I may wish to bring about change, but it must be done with care."

Clarke looked down at her own hands, noting the difference. The callouses on her palms stemmed from the handle of a knife, a scalpel, a tool used to heal rather than harm, but Lexa's hands showed proof of the sword she wielded with such ease, proof of battles fought and won.

"I'm willing to believe you asked me to play the obedient Omega for the same reasons."

Lexa nodded, but did not stop fidgeting with her own hands. She breathed out slowly. "Nevertheless, I was wrong. If you had done as I'd asked, Gustus would be dead and I would have been forced to bury a friend. I won't ask it of you again."

Clarke accepted the apology with a nod. "Thank you."

Many Alphas would not have bothered apologizing to an Omega, regardless of who'd been in the wrong.

Lexa cleared her throat and got up from her seat, moving towards the table and beginning to unstrap her armour. "The rain will most likely not let up anytime soon. You might want to turn in early."

Clarke made an affirmative noise in the back of her throat, eyeing her make-shift bed in the corner with a grimace. She'd gotten used to sleeping on the ground, but the floor was harder than the earth outside and her back protested at the mere thought of spending another night with nothing but a thin blanket to shield her from the worn wood.

"We'll be talking war tomorrow with your Generals, won't we?" she asked instead, mostly to put off bedtime.

"Yes. We'll need to discuss how to best utilize our forces."

"I had a talk with Bellamy," Clarke said and winced at the name, although Lexa only halted her ministrations for the shortest of moments before she gestured for her to continue. "I think we might be able to get him into Mount Weather with Lincoln's help."
"He could relay information from the inside," Lexa mused, pulling off the last plate of her armour and letting it fall on the table.

"And tell us how our people are doing."

"It might be a worthwhile idea, but we'll have to consult my Generals first." The Commander pulled off her coat and laid it out neatly next to her armour.

Clarke had seen her change a couple of times now, though she'd always been careful to give her privacy, and it never failed to fascinate her how different she seemed without all the bits and pieces that made up 'the Commander'.

How she suddenly looked her age.

"I believe it's a good plan."

Lexa took a step towards her cot, towards Clarke, before coming to a halt. "It'll be dangerous. If the Mountain Men catch him, he'll be killed."

Clarke closed her eyes for a moment, trying to dispel images of Wells, of Atom, of all the people they'd lost. "I know."

"We can win this war without taking that risk, Clarke," the Alpha said. "If he is important to you..."

"He is," Clarke confirmed and to Lexa's credit, a short spike in pheromones was the only indication that her inner Alpha was not pleased to hear it. "He's my friend, maybe the best I have left."

Clarke scooted further to the right, an unspoken invitation for Lexa to sit beside her once more. It didn't matter whether the Alpha thought she was sleeping with someone. Lexa wouldn't try to exercise her rights as her mate, Clarke already knew that. She didn't have to explain herself to the Commander, but maybe that was the reason she wanted to. "But that's all. Murphy was supposed to distract you until I got back and chose the worst possible way, as usual."

The Commander sat stiffly. "He's an Alpha. It's only natural for you to be attracted to him."

"Maybe," Clarke declared with a raised eyebrow. "Are you interested in every Omega you see? Are you interested in Octavia, or Murphy?"

"Of course not." Lexa frowned. "Octavia is already mated to one of my warriors. I suppose some might say my status as Commander makes any previous entanglement null and void, but I see no reason to enforce my authority in that way."

Clarke waited for further dismissal, but none was forthcoming. Her eyes narrowed. "What about Murphy?"

"What about him?"

"Are you telling me you're attracted to him?"

To Clarke's horror, Lexa seemed to contemplate the question in earnest before she shrugged her shoulders carelessly. "He smells as Omegas usually do."

Equal parts amusement and terror warred within Clarke at the mental image the Commander's words evoked. And Murphy would probably like it, too, if only because the sight might scar her for life.

She hadn't realized she was pulling a grimace until Lexa's startled chuckle made her expression
falter. The warm sound stopped as soon as it had begun, leaving Lexa looking slightly alarmed.

The Alpha looked away and schooled her mouth back into a relaxed slope. "All Omegas smell attractive to an Alpha," she clarified, casually pushing an escaped strand of hair back behind her shoulder. "But some smell better than others."

Clarke relaxed, ushering the unwanted images out of her brain. It was of no concern to her who Lexa decided to sleep with, of course it wasn't, but she'd rather it was someone not quite so...Murphy.

"You should sleep now," the Commander advised and made as if to get up. "Now that my injury has healed, I'll take the floor."

"Wait." Clarke stopped her with a hand on her shoulder and rose from the cot, walking over to her bag. She paused before reaching into it and retrieving the heavy book. "You probably won't have much time for it, but I thought you might be interested anyway."

Lexa took the book with a curious tilt of her head, tracing the outline of a planet on the cover with the tips of her fingers. "The sky," she murmured, lost in her exploration of the image before her.

"Space, yes," Clarke nodded. "I figured you might want a few pictures to go with what I've told you."

The Alpha opened the book painstakingly slow, studying the first page as intently as she would a battlefield. It showed a simple shot of Earth as taken from space.

"That's Earth," Clarke supplied helpfully, pointing to a specific place on the paper. "And this is where we are. Not exactly of course, but we're somewhere on that continent."

Lexa ran her fingers over the slightly raised letters next to the image as if she could read them by touch alone, hovered, and asked, "What does it say?"

Clarke blinked in surprise at the question, not quite realizing the ramifications of the request until she remembered the book Lincoln used to carry with him, filled with pictures of Octavia, of the Mountain Men, a map of the mines. Always just pictures.

"You can't read," she concluded. "Your people are illiterate."

The Commander tilted her head as if contemplating the meaning of the word, but seemed to draw the right conclusion. "It hasn't always been so. There are records, books, from long ago, but our Keepers preserve our history by word of mouth."

Clarke supposed they both had their shortcomings. She reached out her hand to take the book back, noting the way Lexa's eyes lost some of their fascinated shimmer upon her course of action.

"I'll read it to you," Clarke said quickly, sitting back down and maneuvering the heavy volume until it rested comfortably across both of their laps.

Lexa tensed. "Will you be alright with sitting next to me?"

"I'm not anywhere close to my next heat," Clarke said with a shrug, although she was grateful for the fresh breeze wafting in from outside. "I've spent the last two weeks near you. I'm used to it."

She wasn't, not really, and she suspected she never would be, but the constant hum of awareness prickling over her skin was something she'd just have to deal with. Even if it came with an astounding amount of ruined underwear.
Lexa nodded haltingly, a small smile playing around her lips and eyes already drawn back to the pages in front of them.

As Clarke began to read, the action feeling unfamiliar and odd, like a displaced piece of time, she noticed the Commander's gaze flicking between the book and Clarke, like she was trying to build a connection between the symbols she saw and the sounds Clarke's lips formed.

As for herself, Clarke barely paid attention to the words she read. The initial deal between her and the Commander had been a simple one - Finn's life for Clarke's body. When Lexa had rejected that offer on their wedding night, Clarke had expected something else to crop up, something else the Commander wanted from her.

Wanting an obedient Omega mate as a display of her dominance and status would have been a perfectly logical explanation for accepting the union, but after today even that was no longer an option.

Lexa shouldered all of the drawbacks of their alliance while reaping none of the benefits and one thought kept popping up in the back of Clarke's mind.

*Why did she marry her?*
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

In which Lexa is acting strange and Nyko probably thinks they're all idiots.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bellamy and Lincoln were ready to go by the next morning. The rain had turned the ground muddy, but Lincoln thought they might be able to follow the Reapers' footsteps should they get lost on the way.

Her mother, Kane and even Octavia had already started on their journey back to Camp Jaha earlier that day, along with Indra and a sizable posse of warriors, and so Clarke was the only one to bid them goodbye.

"Remember, if there's any sign of trouble, you come back right away."

Bellamy nodded, adjusting the Grounder jacket and scarf until it didn't look like he was suffocating in fabric. "Don't worry, it'll work out fine."

Clarke fixated Lincoln, looking him over with narrowed eyes. He looked no different than he had before his time in Mount Weather, but Clarke knew better. She'd seen how the Mountain Men treated their prisoners, how they stripped them of all humanity until there was nothing left but animals rattling in their cages.

"Are you sure you can do it?" she asked. "We can find our own way if we have to."

Lincoln stared at the ground for a moment before giving a decisive jerk of his head. "I need to do this," he said seriously, his eyes haunted with memories. "I can't forget what I've done, but what I can do is help you destroy that mountain."

Clarke nodded. That sense of responsibility, of accountability, was something she understood as well as any of them.

Lincoln distanced himself from them, bending down to rummage through his pack unnecessarily, and Clarke shook her head when Bellamy tried to follow.

"Let's give him a minute."

They stood side by side, arms crossed, and watched the village. They were far away enough to see the Grounders bustling about as flecks of activity rather than faces they recognized.

"It looks peaceful, doesn't it?" Bellamy mumbled, eyes fixated on the plainly dressed villagers as they busied themselves with their day-to-day activities. There weren't a lot of them. Not anymore. "Never thought there would come a day when we'd be spending time with the Grounders without trying to kill each other."

Clarke swallowed as they kept looking on in silence. Just a scant few weeks ago, that village had
been drenched in blood.

"Do I have to forgive him?" she finally voiced the thought that had been bouncing around in her head ever since they'd set foot into TonDC, trying to keep her voice from breaking. She'd given up everything to keep Finn alive or had at the very least thought she did. She'd been ready to give herself to a stranger, mind and body, if only it would keep him safe. Forgiving him for what he'd done should come easy, shouldn't it? She should miss him, want to be with him, feel something other than this uncomfortable nothingness in her chest when she thought of him.

Bellamy glanced at her from the corners of his eyes before returning his gaze to the people in the distance. "Do you want to forgive him?"

Clarke couldn't answer that question. Want and should and ought to bled into each other in her head until there was nothing left but a jumbled mess of expectations and desires she couldn't allow herself to have.

"He did it for me. Killed for me," she said instead, burrowing further into her - into Lexa's - jacket when a cold breeze swept the landscape. The Alpha's scent had all but disappeared again and she'd have to exchange it soon. "How could I not?"

What sort of person would she be if this changed her feelings for the boy she thought she'd loved?

Bellamy shook his head. "Finn's actions are not on you. You didn't force him to pull the trigger or kill all those people. We all have our reasons for what we did, our justifications, but that doesn't mean we can blame our wrongdoings on someone else. Or that anyone else should have to suffer for them."

Clarke raised a brow and regarded him with the easy familiarity they'd developed over the months spent fighting for their lives. She barely recognized him now, thinking back to the person he'd been when it had all started. Like all of them, he'd grown up, molded his flesh through horrors and hardship to fill the role he was forced to play now.

"You've come a long way from the selfish asshole Alpha you used to be, haven't you?"

Bellamy snorted, but didn't argue with her description.

"I'd like to think we all have." He nudged her with his elbow and nodded towards her jacket. "Look at you, married to the big bad Grounder Commander."

His good-natured ribbing, even the mention of her unwanted marriage, didn't bother her as much as it would have a few weeks ago.

"For now, anyway," she said with a shake of her head, thinking back to the lake and the aggressive beaver and the wonder in Lexa's eyes as she'd looked at something as simple as a picture of Earth. "And she's not as bad as she likes to pretend."

His voice turned softer, more worried. "So you're getting along, at least? The Commander is treating you well?"

"I don't know what we are, exactly, but we're friendly," she pondered. "It's not easy spending so much time around her. Her smell is everywhere."

He nodded understandingly and she knew she didn't have to elaborate.

"I think she's a good person. She could treat me however she liked and no one would tell her
otherwise, but she doesn’t."

"A powerful and respectful Alpha, huh? Lucky you." Bellamy grinned and Clarke ignored the curious twinkle in his eyes.

Lincoln cleared his throat behind them, indicating his readiness to go with a jerk of his head.

Clarke breathed out, fixing them both with a stare she knew she’d picked up from her mother. "Don’t get killed, okay?"

The two men nodded.

"Wouldn’t dream of it," Bellamy said with a friendly wink. "Monroe would never forgive me if I didn’t bring Harper back alive for her to moon over another day."

Clarke’s frown remained firmly on her face. "I’m serious. Be safe, for Octavia at least."

Bellamy sobered up. "Hey, don’t worry. We’ll get this done."

With a last squeeze to her shoulder, he and Lincoln set off into the forest. Clarke watched them go, an uneasy pressure building in her gut at the realization that this war had only just begun and that she might very well have given Lincoln and Bellamy the last send-off they’d ever experience.

Lexa wasn’t there when Clarke entered the hut. It wasn’t unusual for the Commander to be busy elsewhere, either to keep things in check or prepare her warriors for the coming battles, but Clarke had hoped to catch her in private before the War Council to go over their plans.

If people like Quint had any say in the matter, Clarke’s ideas most likely wouldn’t be heard.

She scanned the room quickly while she got rid of the Commander’s jacket, laying it out across the table for Lexa to find later. What remained of her scent would cling to Clarke, and with both Bellamy’s and Lincoln’s own smells completing the contorted signature of her scent, she wouldn’t be in danger of getting found out as unclaimed, at least long enough for her to get back under Lexa’s protection. She noted that everything seemed untouched - which meant that Lexa hadn’t been back since she’d gotten up and disappeared sometime before Clarke awoke.

She hadn’t meant to sleep in, but the first night on a proper bed and, if she was honest, the Alpha scent still lingering in the bedding, had caused her to get up far later than she’d wanted to. She didn’t even know when she’d fallen asleep the night before, only that she woke up the next morning with the blankets drawn up around her and the book she’d been reading from placed neatly on the table.

With a last observant glance - Lexa’s sword and armour still lay strewn about, though unfortunately no coat for Clarke to wear - she resolved to find her.

She drew the attention of one of the Betas milling about outside. "Hey, have you seen the Commander?"

The elderly woman merely frowned at her and Clarke remembered that only the warriors spoke English.

"Heda," she said, trying to remember the bits and pieces of their language she’d managed to pick up. "Weron?"
The Beta's face lit up in understanding and she gestured past the rows of buildings. "Ste ogud, Skayon," she chuckled.

Clarke returned the oddly mischievous grin on the woman's face with a hesitant and confused nod and followed her directions past the wooden houses towards a small clearing just past the perimeter of the village.

The distinctive sounds of fighting welcomed her.

A band of Alphas had gathered around Lexa, circling her like vultures. For a moment, Clarke worried that this was a mutiny, that the Commander was in serious danger, but none of the warriors had weapons on them. Much like Lexa herself, they stood with hunched backs and raised hands, clad in nothing but shirts and pants.

Even from her position a few feet from the invisible circle, the stench of Alpha sweat and hormones clogged her nose.

With an animalistic roar, the first one - large, male and very Alpha - broke through the ranks and charged Lexa, angling his broad shoulders as though he intended to simply ram her into the ground.

Clarke's breath caught when Lexa stepped to the side at the last moment and drove her elbow into the back of his neck, wincing when he slumped to the ground without so much as a twitch.

The Commander went back into position and jerked her head for the next attacker.

This one didn't go down as easily. Clarke watched as Lexa traded jabs and kicks with the other Alpha, flinching everytime one of them landed a hit. Lexa bore various cuts and bruises on her arms and face by the time she'd managed to pin her opponent to the ground.

When she stood, her teeth were bared in a snarl and her fists, knuckles raw and bloody from the fight, shook with suppressed anger. "Ogeda!"

The other Alphas looked uncertainly from their Commander to each other. Lexa's brow furrowed as she licked a drop of blood from her split lip.

"Ogeda," she repeated, the strained, authoritative tone of her voice sending a needy shiver through Clarke's core.

There was a beat of indecision and then the Alphas rushed her - all at once.

Clarke's fingers buried into the hem of her shirt. There was too much movement, too many limbs to keep track of, but she heard the slap of skin hitting skin and the squelch of blood bursting from ruptured vessels.

All of them fell, one after another, only to struggle to their feet again. Clarke's eyes were glued to Lexa's back, to the play of muscles underneath taut skin and the dark purple smudges forming painful patterns across her body, to the blood flowing from her scraped knuckles and the sweat soaking through her shirt as she made short work of her challengers.

Clarke's nipples hardened, and she couldn't say it was because of the cool air.

Lexa's hand closed around a female Alpha's throat, overpowering her with tightening muscles and a low, dangerous growl, before snapping her teeth in a mock bite.

A carnal moan errupted from the back of her throat before Clarke could hold it back. She clasped a
hand over her mouth with wide eyes as all heads swiveled towards her.

The seconds stretched uncomfortably.

One of the Alphas twitched as if to take a step towards her, but Lexa had him by the scruff of his neck before he could move another muscle, pushing him down and into the dirt with a knee digging into his back.

The Commander fixed the others with narrowed eyes, a thin vein pulsing in her neck. "Bak op," she barked, causing them to lower their heads and step back, and Clarke bit her lip to keep another moan from escaping.

When she was sure her dominance wouldn't be challenged again, Lexa released the trembling man in her grasp and stalked over to Clarke in long, purposeful strides, picking up her discarded coat on the way.

Even after the training session, her limbs bristled with unspent energy as she took hold of Clarke's arm, far rougher than she normally would, and pulled her away from the circle of Grounders. Only after they were out of sight did she let her fingers fall away, balling them into fists instead.

"You shouldn't have been there," she snapped, rolling her shoulders as if it might make her appear more relaxed. It didn't.

Clarke frowned at the reprimand, too confused by the Commander's sudden change in behaviour to be embarrassed about her earlier reaction.

"It wasn't my intention. I was looking for you and one of the villagers told me you were here."

Lexa didn't reply immediatly, sniffing the air and turning cold eyes to Clarke. "I see you've said goodbye to Bellamy."

"Yes, and Lincoln," Clarke said haltingly, wrapping her arms around herself. Without the arousal to keep her warm, the autumn air was beginning to grate on her. "They went off to Mount Weather today."

The Commander's nostrils quivered as she raised her chin and breathed out sharply, teeth pressing together. Clarke couldn't fathom why Lexa would be bothered by Bellamy's scent on her now of all times, just when she'd thought they'd reached some sort of common ground.

"You're not wearing it," Lexa said suddenly, making Clarke blink at the non-sequiteur. "My jacket. You're not wearing it."

"Your smell was gone, so I took it off."

Seemingly ignoring her answer, Lexa held out the coat in her hands. When Clarke didn't react quickly enough for her liking, the Commander grunted and draped the still-warm fabric around her shoulders.

The warmth was pleasant on Clarke's rapidly-cooling skin, as was the smell that once again enveloped her. She'd gotten used to it, she realized, to having Lexa's scent around her constantly. It had become familiar, as rousing as it was comforting.

"It's too cold to go without proper apparel," Lexa said, noticeably calmer now that Bellamy's scent was being chased away by hers.
Clarke gave the other woman's own choice of attire and her bare arms a pointed look, but chose not to comment on sweat and cold air not mixing well. She could feel the unnatural heat the Alpha's skin emitted and decided to attribute it to the physical exertion of training.

"I'm fine," she assured her, slipping her arms into the sleeves of the coat. She knew she wouldn't be able to get it closed and she didn't try. Lexa was slimmer than most Alphas, but Clarke was built like the stereotypical Omega - round face and shoulders, curvy hips for childbearing and just enough fat on her to appear soft and inviting - and it showed in the tightness of the fabric around her upper arms and hips.

"Are you ready for the War Council?" Lexa asked and laid a possessive hand on Clarke's lower back, leading her further away from the clearing. Her steps were fast and clunky, very unlike her usual graceful bearing, and Clarke had some trouble keeping up with her pace.

The Commander narrowed her eyes. "Have you had anything to eat yet?" she asked abruptly.

"What?"

Lexa's gaze flickered from Clarke's stomach to the working villagers around them. "I can have someone prepare something for you. Would you prefer meat or bread?" She shook her head. "No, I suppose both would be best."

Clarke's eyebrows rose up to her hairline as she let herself be steered through the village. "Lexa, I-"

"You may wish to try the deer."

"Lexa-"

"I hunted it myself."

"Lexa!"

The Commander came to a sudden halt at her raised voice, her hand remaining securely on her back. "Yes, Clarke?"

Clarke frowned, studying the wild look in her eyes and the sheen of sweat on her neck. She'd assumed it came from training, but even now Lexa showed no signs of settling down. "What's wrong with you?"

Lexa blinked and finally removed her fingers from Clarke's back, carefully and with intent. She breathed out and forced her shoulders to drop, stepping back.

"It's nothing," she said eventually, making a visible effort to regain her usual calm demeanor. "My...instincts are acting up today, it seems. Please don't worry yourself over it."

Clarke wasn't sure 'nothing' was quite the right word for something that caused the Alpha to come out of training with bruises and sluggishly bleeding cuts all over her skin.

"At least let me take a look at those wounds," she said and reached up to inspect a particularly nasty cut on Lexa's cheekbone, conveniently layered right above the bruise she'd sustained from the last bout of exercise, but the Commander shied away from her touch.

"They will heal," the Alpha intoned tersely.

"They'll still have to be cleaned, Lexa."
The Commander shook her head and distanced herself further, holding her arms behind her back and pulling her shoulders taut. It was a gesture Clarke hadn't seen executed quite that rigidly since the night she'd tried to seduce Lexa and she couldn't explain it to herself.

"I'll take a bath in the lake," the Commander spoke sharply. "If I'm in need for medical attention after that, Nyko will be a more than adequate option. I'll be back in time for the War Council."

Clarke was left standing in the middle of the village as she watched Lexa leave, her hands at her sides clenching and unclenching and a quick stab of something - disappointment, confusion, hurt? - prodding at her chest.

Lacking other options, Clarke entered the hut they had claimed as Gustus' temporary sick room in search of Nyko. Her mother had taken care of most of the injuries, but he was left to look after Gustus and make sure he wouldn't strain himself too early.

From what Clarke had experienced when Lexa had been the one wounded, it seemed all Grounders had a tendency to get themselves in over their head if not dragged back to bed constantly.

Nyko wasn't there like she'd hoped. Instead, the sound of Murphy's snoring filled the small hut from where he was curled up in a corner with a blanket wrapped around him. On further inspection, Clarke realized that it was simply a too-large jacket covering him.

"The boy is a nuisance," a low, hoarse voice grumbled and Clarke noticed with a start that Gustus was awake and looking at her. "I hope you're here to collect him."

There was no bite in Gustus' tone and it might have been the most civil greeting she'd ever gotten from him.

"He is," Clarke agreed readily. "But I'm afraid you're stuck with him. He already almost got you killed once, so his quota should be filled."

The large man merely grunted and pushed himself up into a sitting position, huffing quietly at his no doubt stinging injuries.

"How are you feeling?" she asked awkwardly, not knowing whether he would welcome her approach.

"Alive."

He barely looked the part. His face was swollen in places and the cuts across his cheek and forehead had crusted over. Clarke couldn’t quite shake the memory of his slumped form hanging lifelessly in his binds.

"Why didn’t you protest?" she asked suddenly, shaking her head. "You just let them lead you away."

He just let Lexa think that he’d betrayed her.

Gustus grunted. A scant few days ago, he might not have answered. “I had no evidence. Nothing that would have proven my innocence. But had I told Le- the Commander of my innocence, she would not have had me executed.”

“So why didn’t you?”
His large palm came up to cover the wound Lexa’s dagger had inflicted on his arm. “She needed to be strong. She needed to make that decision and show everyone that she is not swayed by sentimentality. I did not want to die, but for her I had to.”

Clarke swallowed. There was never any doubt that Gustus was willing to die for Lexa, but she couldn’t have imagined how deep that loyalty ran.

Clearing his throat, he continued. "The boy tells me I have you to thank for my life."

"You should thank the Mountain Men for not bothering to use one of your arrows, too."

He inclined his head, deep wrinkles appearing on his forehead. "I might not have done the same for you."

"I know." Clarke nodded. "But you weren't guilty. And Lexa would have hated to lose you."

Gustus seemed surprised by her answer, or maybe he’d merely flinched from the pain, before he fixed her with a calm stare. "I have misjudged you, Clarke of the Sky People." He lowered his head. "I apologize."

"You wanted to protect her. You knew marrying me would fall back on her," she stated.

It was what her own father would have done, what he'd tried to do when she wanted to help him bring his research to the public. The back of her eyes began to sting as she wondered whether he would have reacted the same way to her union with the Commander or whether he'd have been loving and supportive, ready as always to trust her to find her own way.

"I did. And I will continue to do so until she decides otherwise," Gustus spoke, pausing before his next words. "But the Commander would not be able to hold her position if she could not take care of herself. She is a better fighter than I."

After seeing Lexa take on an entire group of Alphas by herself and come out on top, Clarke did not doubt the statement.

"It's not her physical well-being I worry about." His eyes darkened and some of the usual hostility returned, though Clarke suspected it was an intentional move on his part. A warning.

"You are in a unique position to harm her. And one day, you will."

Clarke frowned. "I have no reason to."

This whole alliance rested on them getting along and they did. Harming the Commander would accomplish nothing and Clarke didn't want to. They weren't enemies, not anymore.

"You don't need a reason," he said calmly, like it was an inevitability. "You can hurt her, whether it is your intention or not. The Commander sees it, too, but for all of her strength, the part of her she guards the most is the one most vulnerable. And she doesn't even realize it."

Clarke swallowed at his deadpan stare, at the shadow that fell over his eyes.

"And if you respect her as a person in any way at all, you would do well to ask her to release you from the union."

She wanted to answer, to at the very least ask what he meant, but the door opened behind her before she could make a sound and the cold air made goosebumps erupt on her skin.
"Komheda," Nyko greeted her with a respectful incline of his head. Clarke had heard a few Grounders call her the same thing as she'd passed, but the most she'd been able to glean was that it was the term for the Commander's spouse. "Can I help you?"

Clarke's gaze flickered to Gustus, but he'd already lain back and closed his eyes.

"Yes," she said, remembering her original reason for coming here. "I need something to disinfect wounds. The Commander has a few cuts and bruises from training."

While Lexa had claimed to plan to visit Nyko herself after her bath, Clarke suspected she wouldn't. Another part of Grounder pride apparently involved thinking oneself immune to bacteria.

Nyko frowned, but opened the pack at his hip to search for what she needed. "Really? How strange. I would have assumed she wouldn't be in need of any sparring sessions this time around." He handed her a small tin, the mere hint of a smirk playing around his lips. "I am surprised that you are here at all, I admit. Most mated Alphas prefer to take care of their urges before they become a bother. Although I suppose she might want you to focus on the Council today."

"Nyko," Gustus hissed from his bed, opening one eye to glare at him.

Clarke furrowed her brows. "What do you mean, her 'urges'?"

"Oh." Nyko's eyes widened slightly in surprise as he looked contemplatively from her to a still scowling Gustus. "I apologize, I assumed you knew."

He walked to Gustus' side, throwing a sceptical glance at Murphy's sleeping form as he went past, and started inspecting his injuries. Going by Gustus' pained hiss and affronted glower, Nyko wasn't particularly concerned with being careful.

"It's nearing the end of the year," he explained, diligently ignoring the large hands trying to swat him away and the scowl warning him to keep his mouth shut. "The Commander is going into rut."

Clarke blinked, realization dawning. Of course. If Lexa was going into rut, it would explain her change in behaviour.

Alphas weren't like Omegas. They didn't go into heat once a month, but they did enter their rutting period sometime in autumn. They'd be angrier, more violent towards their fellow Alphas and more eager to find someone to mate with. Biologically speaking, it was a sound concept. Mating now would mean that all children would be born sometime in spring, when food and water was plentiful, although Lexa's rut did seem to be a tad early.

It certainly explained why the Commander wanted her as far away as possible. Clutching the tin of medicine in her hand, Clarke swallowed.

Lexa didn't trust her, and it stung far more than it should have.

Chapter End Notes

Trigedaslang:

"Ste ogud." = "Be ready."
"Ogeda!" = "Together!"
"Komheda" = "From/Of/With the Commander" (Basically, "one who belongs to the Commander").
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

In which Quint gets what's coming to him and Clarke...doesn't.

Clarke was pacing at the edge of the village, waiting for Lexa to come back from her bath. She didn’t dare follow after her, least of all since the Commander had made it clear that she did not want her to. Just as she’d made it clear that she didn't trust Clarke with the information that she was going into rut.

When the Alpha's form finally emerged from the tree line, Clarke came to a stop and crossed her arms in front of her chest.

"Why didn't you tell me you were going into rut?" she asked once Lexa was within earshot, not bothering to delay the conversation. The Generals were most likely already waiting for them, but they needed to have this conversation now and set some ground rules.

Lexa didn't respond until they were standing in front of each other. She appeared much calmer now, her hair damp from water rather than sweat and her gaze steady.

She fixed her eyes on Clarke, flitting only briefly over her own coat adorning Clarke's body, and shook her head. "Because it wasn't necessary."

"Not necessary?" Clarke arched an annoyed eyebrow. "You got yourself into a fight with a bunch of Alphas, you got hurt, and you thought it wasn't necessary to tell me why?"

Lexa growled at her and Clarke ignored the excited quiver in her stomach.

"It's only the early stages," the Alpha said. "It doesn't compromise me."

"Yet. It'll get worse, Lexa."

Clarke stood her ground as the Commander stepped closer to glare down at her, near enough to make Clarke swallow down a gasp at the heavy Alpha musk washing over her.

"Just let it go," the Alpha ground out as a flush traveled up her neck. The pheromones in the air were affecting her and Clarke wondered just how much Lexa was willing to torture herself just to retain her goddamn pride.

"Not if it gets you hurt."

As she spoke, Lexa's eyes slid down her nose and caught on her mouth, wide green eyes burning. Clarke licked her lips reflexively.

"It's my risk to bear," the Commander hissed as her gaze traveled to Clarke's thundering pulse and back up to her lips.

Clarke's eyes narrowed. "Not anymore." She punctuated the words with two tiny steps until Lexa had no option but to accept a breach of her personal space or step back and admit defeat.
She couldn't force Lexa to trust her and she wouldn't try, but sooner or later the Commander would have to accept that Clarke was not going to stand back and cower.

"This affects both of us and you know that," she said. "We're supposed to present as a unit and we can't do that if you won't tell me anything."

She rummaged through her pack to pull out the salve Nyko had given her and unceremoniously took a hold of Lexa's chin.

"Or if you won't let me treat your injuries," she continued, dipping her fingers into the tin and lifting them to the Alpha's face.

The Commander didn't protest, her shoulders twitching and a low, barely noticeable rumble building in her chest, as Clarke daubed the thick, colourless medicine over the shallow cuts and dark purple bruises.

"There you go, that wasn't...so...," Clarke murmured and trailed off.

Lexa's breath had quickened at her proximity and Clarke clenched her teeth to keep from reacting. She averted her eyes from the Commander's wide pupils and looked down between their bodies instead.

She sucked in a sharp breath at the sight. Lexa was obviously excited, her pants sporting a painful-looking buldge, though Clarke couldn't tell whether it was despite or because of their argument.

A hand grasped her own where it was still resting against the side of the Alpha's face and tugged until it rested comfortably against the Commander's shoulder just beneath the plates of her armour.

Clarke could feel the tiny scars on the inside of the Alpha's palm against her own skin.

Her eyes found Lexa's again and a short spike of electricity ran up her arm. The Commander's head moved closer, closer, so much closer until her breath brushed over Clarke's lips, eliciting a shiver.

"Just let it be," the Alpha murmured, wetting her lips. The resoluteness of her request got lost between her quick breaths and Clarke's too-loud heart-beat.

Whether consciously or not, Lexa wanted to kiss her, and the dark, heavy scent in the air made it hard for Clarke to remember whether she welcomed it or not.

The part of her that was Omega crooned and wanted to rock up on her heels to close the last few inches of distance between them, but the Commander's fingers grazing against the underside of her jaw kept her rooted to the spot.

Lexa's eyelids drooped as if to close and her carress turned into a soft grip against the back of her neck.

The unbidden little sound of surprise that fell from Clarke's parted lips was unnaturally loud in the quiet between their mouths.

It startled the Alpha out of her trance.

With a deep breath and rapidly blinking eyes, Lexa backed off. Clarke instantly regretted the loss of her hands around her neck and wrist.

"My Generals," Lexa said abruptly, not quite able to mask the husky quality of her voice or the jerky
movements of her chest. "We shouldn't keep them waiting."

She brushed past her and Clarke gritted her teeth, whirling around. Humiliation burned in her stomach at being dismissed so easily. "We're not done talking."

Lexa paused. "We are for now. We'll discuss this later."

Clarke scoffed and started the walk towards the center of the village, not bothering to hide her annoyance. "Fine then, no more talking," she threw over her shoulder. "Might want to get rid of your raging erection before coming after me, though. God forbid any of your Generals start to think you might actually be human."

She took an almost childish sort of satisfaction in the stunned silence she left behind.

Clarke had known that a room full of Grounders with different opinions would be a harrowing experience. What she hadn't considered was that most of them would be Alphas, that her own hormones were running wild and that Lexa would be starting her rut and was therefore a lot less reasonable than usual.

"We should wait for Bellamy to infiltrate Mount Weather and establish a line of communication," Clarke finished her explanation of her plan, looking around to gauge everyone's reactions.

Predictably, Quint was standing furthest from her on the opposite side of the room and regarded her with disdain written all over his face. She hadn't counted on his vote.

The other Generals seemed torn and contemplative, just as reluctant to give an Omega credit for a good strategy as she'd thought they would be. Except Clarke had counted on Lexa to smooth things over for her, to use her authority to get them to really listen to what Clarke had to say.

But the Commander wasn't even looking at her. Her eyes were stubbornly fixed on the map in front of her, pretending to be engrossed in her own thoughts.

Clarke had no doubt that Lexa had listened to every word as intently as she always did, but she was equally as sure that she couldn't count on her help this time.

"Is this really the best course of action? Waiting?" one of the Alphas piped up from the back, earning herself affirmative murmurs. "We should just attack them head-on."

"It's too dangerous," Clarke argued. "We'd not only kill hundreds of innocent people, we'd lose a lot of our own, too. With an inside man, we'll have a far better chance at knowing what we're up against and devising a plan that will keep casualties to a minimum."

Quint snorted derisively and seperated himself from the wall, stalking closer with his chin in the air. Clarke chanced a glance at Lexa, but the Alpha was still not paying her any heed.

"So weak," he spat. "Maungedakru have been capturing and torturing our people for decades and you'd let them live."

As Lexa made no movement to intervene, Clarke took a step towards him in an attempt to project confidence. She couldn't let it show that the Alpha hormones in the hut were getting to her.

"I'm trying to make sure our people get out of this war alive. All of them. And there is no reason to kill anymore than we have to."
She almost choked on the wave of Alpha rage Quint emitted at his next words. "You had no trouble burning my brother alive, but you worry about those cravens hiding away in their mountain?"

The other Generals got out of his way as he advanced and came to a stop right before her. Clarke resisted the urge to retreat or seek protection behind Lexa. She couldn't fight him for dominance as another Alpha would and she couldn't make him back down with her scent and bared teeth. As an Omega, all she had was reason, logic, and at times, sheer stubbornness.

As an Omega, respect was a hard-earned good.

"You are a pitiful excuse of a leader," Quint seethed. "And everyone knows it."

Clarke didn't dare show any weakness by looking directly at Lexa again, though she could smell her agitation and see her knuckles turning white as she gripped the map harder from the corners of her eyes.

Her rut had to make it difficult to resist tearing into Quint, but Lexa didn't step in. Clarke swallowed when she contemplated the thought that she had outlived her welcome here, that Lexa was no longer willing to indulge her.

That she was no longer willing to take on the task of protecting Clarke when she had no real obligation to do so.

Clarke lifted her chin, staring straight into Quint's eyes. "Your brother attacked my ship. And those who are a danger to my people will get what's coming to them."

She turned her attention from him to the rest of the room and he gasped at her insolence. It wasn't polite to turn away from an Alpha when they were still speaking and quite frankly, Clarke couldn't care less. "But that does not mean the senseless killing of innocents, of children."

"No one in that mountain is innocent," Quint barked, his hands twitching in suppressed ire. "But a weak Omega like you can't see that. You are too safe, too coddled by the Commander's protection to-"

"Quint."

It was the first word Lexa had uttered since this discussion began and it put an immediate stop to Quint's rant, freezing the entire room in the process. She looked remarkably calm, considering there were aggressive Alpha pheromones pressing in on her on all sides.

Clarke fared much worse. That single word, spoken like the lash of a whip, had every hair on her body stand to attention and every nerve ending beneath her skin buzzing with excitement. Even on a good day, it was hard to disregard the way Lexa's smell made her feel. Enclosed in a room with too many Alphas, too much competition and the anger, the disappointment of the argument she'd had with Lexa still fresh in her mind, it was damn near impossible.

"While his presentation of the case leaves much to be desired," the Commander started and Clarke barely noticed that she was addressing her over the sudden pulsing in her lower stomach. "Quint is right. Placing all our hopes in one man is not a plan."

Clarke drew in a breath and regretted it instantly. It only made her more aware of her position. Trying to blink away her daze, she straightened her spine.

"I...I need some fresh air," she said. It wasn't as forceful as she wanted it to be, but getting out of the oppressive heat of the building took priority. As she stormed past Lexa out the door, she thought she
felt a slight tremble in the Commander's limbs.

The cool autumn breeze did wonders for her condition.

The muted arousal that always clung to her like smoke whenever Lexa was around lessened the further she distanced herself from the building.

Clarke walked and walked, into the trees, until there wasn't even the bland smell of Beta to disturb her peace. She contemplated taking off the Commander's jacket to clear her head further, but she knew she'd be freezing in just her shirt and despite the fact that no one was around, she'd rather not risk it.

Clarke wondered just how long they could keep up this pretense. They didn't behave as mates would, she knew that. They acted barely affectionate enough to be considered friends and the Grounders had to notice that Clarke's scent fluctuated, that she smelled too different from Octavia to be a mated Omega like her.

She suspected they would have found her out already if Omegas weren't too rare in their society for them to be truly familiar with their physiology.

Another part of Clarke wondered whether Lexa even wanted them to keep pretending. She didn't trust her and she didn't want to mate her. She was the least possessive Alpha Clarke had ever encountered and if today was anything to go by, she was tired of having to protect Clarke at every corner.

Clarke shivered as she remembered Lexa's words, back on the night of their wedding.

*We're bonded for now, but that will not always have to be so.*

Their relationship, union, whatever fragile connection Clarke had thought they'd built, it had always had an ultimatum. And she supposed it had simply expired sooner than planned.

The Commander didn't *want* her friendship. Didn't want any part of her.

And it shouldn't hurt Clarke, shouldn't make her feel like she was losing something, but it did.

The snap of a twig pulled her out of her thoughts. Her muscles locked and her feet halted their mechanical movements. She'd been living on the ground long enough to be familiar with the sounds of the forest, to be able to tell the difference between a breeze rustling through the trees and the commotion of approaching enemies.

This noise was caused by the latter. It was too heavy, too concentrated a sound to be natural.

Her eyes scanned her surroundings nervously, her breath catching in the back of her throat for fear of giving away her position. She shouldn't have wandered off so far. She should have taken protection with her.

Clarke smelled him before she saw him.

He was standing at the bottom of the ridge, observing her through the trees. If Clarke hadn't recognized him by his tattoos or stature, the scent would have tipped her off.

Quint smelled like Alpha, but overpowering and uncomfortable. Not like her mother's authoritative signature, or like Bellamy's familiar, only occasionally overbearing musk. Certainly nothing like
Lexa's warm, protective scent.

He was one of those Alphas who so desperately wanted to hide their shortcomings that they accumulated musk however they could.

He reeked.

Clarke breathed in deeply and continued her trek, trying to keep him in her line of sight. Grounders were one with their surroundings, the nature they grew up with, so he had to have alerted her to his presence on purpose.

Quint wanted her to know that he was after her.

A bout of cold sweat began to bead on her forehead, making her shake from the cold creeping into her limbs. It was a sick little game of revenge to him and it was working.

She glanced away from him, just for a moment, just long enough to make sure she wouldn't run into a tree, but just like that, he was gone. Hidden from her line of sight, but not from her sense of smell. His odour lurked in every nook and cranny of the forest.

Clarke ran.

Her boots got sucked into the muddy forest floor with every step, but she kept going, not once stopping to look behind her. She wouldn't see anything he didn't want her to.

Her thighs soon began to burn with exhaustion, the freezing air she sucked into her lungs making her chest ache and a knot of discomfort rise in her throat. The soft earth doubled the strain and when one of her feet slipped against the mud, it was almost a relief.

She spared herself a dive into the mud when her hands found the rough bark of a tree, the insides of her palms dragging over it painfully as she skidded to a halt.

Breathing raggedly, her back thumped heavily against the tree and she narrowed her eyes.

Quint stood, watching her, barely sweating from the chase.

"Running won't do you any good, bitch," he snarled, fingers closing around the handle of his sheathed sword casually. "You might try and cover yourself with Alphas, but that smell of yours will always come through."

She pulled her jacket tighter around herself and he smirked. "No matter where you run, I will track you. Unclaimed Omega is a scent no Alpha can forget."

Her eyes widened, panic starting to climb up her spine.

"I'm not unclaimed," she lied through her teeth, hands searching for the gun at her hip. She felt the cold steel at the tips of her fingers, but she knew drawing her weapon would make him attack. She wasn't particularly good with a gun and he'd be on her before she could fire a single shot. "I'm your Commander's mate."

Quint scoffed.

"Your lies may work on her, but you're not going to fool me. I have been wondering why the Commander would allow some Skaikru whore to make a fool of her. Running around with other Alphas, acting out of line, defying her rightful authority...and then I realized," He stretched his neck
with a loud pop and advanced on her. "She won't control her property because she doesn't own you. She hasn't mated you, has she?"

If Clarke had had an space to do so, she would have retreated to a safe distance. The tree at her back made such an action impossible and she knew running again would do her no good. He hadn't been lying. Just as she could smell him, he could follow her scent just as easily.

She covered her nose, tears pricking at the back of her eyes when she realized her body was responding even now, when her mind felt nauseous at the mere thought of him and fear coiled around her middle like a vice.

"It's a disgrace," Quint continued, disgust dripping from his every word. "What you have done to her. A proud Alpha, reduced to some breeder's lapdog. Neutered."

The sharp melody of his sword slipping out of its sheath made Clarke's ears ring. One moment, a single moment of distraction might be enough for her to pull her gun, but his focus never wavered.

"How did you do it? How did you manage to manipulate her so well that she doesn't even realize what you are?"

He bared his teeth in a smile devoid of humour. "Nevermind. I suppose when you are the pet of a bitch, you'll do near everything for the mere promise of a reward."

Cold steel pressed against her neck and forced her harder against the tree, the bark digging uncomfortably into her back.

"What do you want, Quint?" she hissed, lifting her head for some relief against the pressure of the sharp blade. She tried to breathe through the terror crippling her limbs, through the images assaulting her mind, the stories she'd had ingrained into her mind - don't ever get caught, don't ever get yourself into a hopeless situation, don't ever provoke an Alpha's instincts - but her voice came out quieter and far more shaky than she'd wanted it to. "If you even think about touching me, I will rip off your knot and feed it to you. Lexa will rip you to shreds."

It was a bluff, fake bravado based on the hope that he was far more afraid of Lexa than he let on, and it merely earned a repulsed grimace from the Grounder.

"I am not an animal, Omega, and I would not couple with you even if you begged me to." Her relief was short-lived when the edge of the blade cut into her skin, almost drawing blood. "What I want is justice for the lives you took. The very same thing the Commander was too spineless or too weak to take from you in the first place."

"You won't survive the day," Clarke said, not daring to swallow around the dryness in her mouth.

"You have left the Commander's protection," he reminded her, his form relaxed and at ease, entirely certain of his victory. "She is not here. Or maybe she has finally tired of you, just as I've predicted. She didn't support you back in the village, what makes you think she would care if I ended your life?"

Clarke flinched, all the doubts and suspicions she'd had since their wedding rushing back into her.

What would it change if she died here and now?

The Arkers might follow Lexa or the Grounders might kill them all. Lexa might use them as a bargaining chip, as pawns on her chess board.
Or she might prove to be the person Clarke had started to see in her, someone who was as strong as she was cunning. Someone fiercely protective of her people. Someone who hopefully would not go back on her word that they were one people now, regardless of the status of their union.

"I am not like you, hiding in your ship like a coward while my brother burned," Quint said, and even the traces of ridicule had left his face. Now all there was were hard, determined planes and the utmost certainty that he would not hesitate to run her through with his sword. "But there is one thing we agree on. Those who are a danger to my people will get what's coming to them."

Clarke closed her eyes, the anxious tears finally beading at the edges of her lashes, hands fisting into the fabric of her jacket like it would provide some measure of comfort when there was none to be found.

Her pulse hammered against sharp metal, the pressure against her throat increased and just as she thought her skin would break, she heard a voice she hadn't even dared to hope for.

"And yet you would threaten someone without giving them a chance to fight back, like only a coward would."

Quint's eyes widened only a fraction before his head was thrown to the side, his sword clattering uselessly to the ground as he reeled from the force of Lexa's punch.

She didn't spare Clarke a single glance.

Her eyes were wild and her lips were pressed into a thin, angry line and Quint didn't stand a chance. He raised his hands and opened his mouth as if to defend himself - or to plead - but a brutal jab to his throat cut him off and made him stumble, heavy frame collapsing onto the ground.

Lexa wiped a speck of blood from Quint's once again ruptured nose from her cheekbone and snarled, low and threatening, like a predator observing her prey.

Clarke sucked in a breath of pheromone-laden air, unable to tear her eyes away from the display. Her clit throbbed.

It suddenly occurred to her that she'd never seen Lexa in an actual fight before. She'd seen her threaten her warriors into submission, even seen her spar with them before, but here the stakes were entirely different.

It was ruthless and aggressive and so very Alpha and Clarke pressed a hand to her mouth to stifle a quiet groan.

Quint's hand attempted to close around Lexa's ankle, but she evaded the clumsy movement. The sharp kick to his ribs that followed caused a sickening crunch and a howl of pain.

"How can you not see what she's doing?" he wheezed, staring up at her through a rapidly swelling eye. "Undermining your authority, letting others spread their scent all over her."

Lexa's back was turned to her, but Clarke could see her shoulders beginning to shake in barely contained rage.

Her hips rocked involuntarily.

"She's probably already carrying some other Alpha's basta-"

Quint never got to finish his accusation. Lexa descended upon him with a shiver-inducing howl, the
ugly sound of bones hitting flesh overtaking everything else as her fists found their mark.

Clarke watched the spectacle and a part of her was scared. Scared of the way Lexa seemed to have forgotten she was there, of the blood staining the Commander's knuckles.

But most of all, Clarke was undeniably and inconceivably aroused. If the smell of Lexa's dominance hadn't been enough, the sight of her would have been.

Defending her territory, a voice in the back of Clarke's mind whispered. Defending what's hers.

She bit into the flesh of her hand, just below the thumb, to stop herself from slipping her fingers past the waistband of her pants and between her legs.

It wasn't right to be feeling this way, not now, not when she'd almost been killed and Lexa was beating a man in front of her, but she couldn't help it. The Omega in her reveled in having an Alpha fight for her sake.

It reveled in having Lexa fight for her.

"Lexa," she whimpered, and she wasn't sure whether it was an indication of her excitement or a plea for her to stop.

Nevertheless, the Alpha halted in her tracks. When Lexa finally stood, her chest and shoulders heaved with her ragged breaths, her muscles trembled from the exertion and her head was bowed.

Quint wasn't moving. Clarke couldn't tell whether he was dead or merely unconscious.

"Lexa," she repeated shakily. The Commander's head twitched at hearing her voice. "Lexa, are you-
"

The words caught in her throat when Lexa's eyes met hers. Her pupils were blown wide, her teeth bared in a snarl and blood clung to her cheekbones.

A sharp spark of desire pulsed low in Clarke's belly. She pressed herself closer to the tree at her back for fear of her shaking thighs giving way beneath her.

And then, suddenly, Lexa was on her.

The Alpha had moved too fast for her hazy mind to register it, pressing their bodies together from chest to toe, trapping her between rough bark and soft flesh.

Clarke sucked in a breath.

A strained rumble vibrated in Lexa's chest as she shifted her weight to rest more fully against her and buried her face into the blonde curls resting against Clarke's neck. She inhaled deeply, releasing a satisfied growl onto her feverish skin.

The heat between their bodies was stifling, the heady scent of Alpha arousal thick in the air and Clarke was burning up.

She'd been wet before just from watching Lexa, but now she could feel it dripping down her thighs.

The Alpha groaned throatily in response to the new batch of pheromones. Her hips twitched, once, twice, and Clarke's fingers scrabbled for a secure grip on the tree. Lexa was hard, her erection hot and heavy even through the stiff material of her pants, as she rocked into Clarke.
Their hips lined up perfectly, Lexa's bulge rubbing against the seam of Clarke's pants, and Clarke instinctively reciprocated the motion, longing for more direct contact.

She whined in frustration at the barest hint of pressure against where she needed it most that Lexa's slow rutting provided.

"You smell so good," Lexa groaned quietly into her neck. Clarke couldn't answer, not when one of the Alpha's hands grabbed her thigh and hiked it up and around her hips. The new, improved angle caused the covered length of Lexa's cock to press directly against Clarke's clit with every movement and Clarke's eyes fluttered shut, her inner muscles clenching around nothing.

"Do you have any idea?" Lexa punctuated every word with a hard cant of her hips, wrenching gasps from Clarke's parted lips. "Do you have any idea what you do to me?"

Clarke didn't, but if it was anything like what the Alpha did to her, she wondered how Lexa had managed to hide it so well. The contact between them only just so provided the sensations Clarke craved, but she'd been worked up for weeks now and it was enough.

"How hard it is to have you near me and not give in and knot you," the Alpha continued, the tortured, panted words reverberating through her throat down Clarke's spine and strengthening the already unbearable throbbing of her clit. "When I can smell how wet you get for me."

The hand that wasn't holding her thigh reached out to clasp her hip in a white-knuckled grip, alternating between trying to hold her steady and encouraging her to meet the Alpha's movements.

Clarke couldn't help it. Her fingers separated from the tree and slithered around Lexa's waist, digging her nails into her ass to urge her into a faster, harder rhythm. The Commander hissed in surprise, but obliged.

"You come to me smelling like Alpha and all I want to do is rip out their throat and make sure they know that you're mine," Lexa snarled, teeth scraping over the skin of her neck. Clarke's hips bucked, the slide of their bodies torturous and delicious at the same time. Delicious because Clarke was positively soaked and it had been a few long, hard weeks and feeling the Alpha's body rocking against hers sent her spiraling quickly towards an unexpected orgasm.

Torturous because she wanted more, wanted to get rid of the barriers between them and tug Lexa to the ground and between her thighs.

She wasn't in heat, yet she felt an overwhelming need to tip her head back and present her bare throat as a sign of her submission, to pull the Alpha further against her, into her.

Lexa wrapped a hand around her neck, thumb pressing into the underside of her jaw to keep her throat exposed. Clarke couldn't see her face, but she thought she felt her mouth form an angry grimace at her next words. "Instead I run and take care of myself while imagining what you would feel like beneath my hands, what it would feel like to hold you down and fuck you, like I'm some out-of-control pup."

"Oh god, Lexa."

Her husky exclamation made Lexa halt for a frustrating second, then pick up right where she left off, rutting against her almost mindlessly, the muscles of her ass flexing and twitching beneath Clarke's palms.

Clarke was close. So so close, the tension in her belly that had accumulated over the last weeks threatening to mount, and she focused on the hot bursts of breath against her neck, the Alpha's
trembling shoulders that proved she was just as close.

It took Clarke's hazy mind a moment to decipher the words Lexa had started mumbling into her neck, but then she realized the Alpha was chanting her name like a mantra, the rhythm of her hips becoming sloppy and uneven.

Lexa was about to come and the thought thrilled Clarke to her very core.

All she could to was tighten her grip and urge her to continue, her own climax building and building until she thought she would couldn't possibly go any higher and then-

An ear-splitting roar burst the bubble of lust around them.

Like she'd been doused with a bucket of ice-cold water, Lexa jerked back.

Clarke shivered at the sudden absence of warmth and bit her lip to keep a groan of frustration from bubbling up. She shook her head sharply. Her arousal was still pounding through her mercilessly to remind her of just how close she'd been, but a measure of fear now wiggled itself into her distracted brain.

"What was that?" she asked, out of breath, wrapping her arms around herself and looking for the source of the sound.

Lexa was studying their surroundings with sharp eyes, though Clarke couldn't tell whether her clenched jaw and stiff shoulders were a product of apprehension or of the climax that had eluded her.

An ominous rustle sounded. Whatever had caused it was not yet upon them, but it was big.

"Pauna," the Commander whispered, her eyes widening and dread overtaking her features. She whirled around and Clarke only realized the gravity of their situation when Lexa grabbed her hand without hesitation.

"Clarke, run!"
Clarke didn't know how long they ran.

The sounds of the forest were swallowed by her own panting, by Lexa's quick breaths, by the blood rushing through Clarke's ears.

Her thighs were threatening to give way, the exhaustion of earlier catching up to her, and if it weren't for the adrenaline pumping through her veins she would have given up on keeping upright already.

She tried to focus on Lexa's hand in hers, counting the little scars and callouses when her aching muscles threatened to overwhelm her.

It was comforting, somehow. Something real and alive against the near abstract danger chasing them.

Even so, she knew they weren't safe. She couldn't hear it, but she could feel the ground beneath them shaking, see the birds around them fleeing.

She could feel the cold sweat on Lexa's skin against her own palm.

Her eyes caught something to their left and she stopped, taking only a second to catch her breath before pulling at Lexa's hand to get her attention.

"There."

It was a sort of pipe, large enough to allow them to climb inside. They couldn't keep running much longer and this might prove to be their salvation.

Lexa merely nodded grimly and followed Clarke's lead.

They slipped inside and through, coming out the other side into what Clarke vaguely recognized as something that might have been an open structure at some point - rocks that looked foreign to this place, a high wall of stone surrounding them. It was a cage, and Clarke feared they were running from what it was to hold in the first place.

She looked up at the construction of large rocks and paled, her grip on the Commander's hand tightening instinctively.

Torn flesh and broken bones littered the surface of every boulder, putrid and long since forgotten in favour of fresher kills. Some of the carcasses were recognizable, deers and boars, but some Clarke couldn't assign to a specific animal.

A wave of nauseousness welled up in her when she recognized what looked like armour half-buried in a mess of bloodied meat and Clarke suddenly wished she hadn't looked so close.

"We walked right into its nest," she said, swallowing down the bile rising in her throat. "Into its
"Clarke," Lexa said and carefully separated their hands. Clarke felt the loss keenly, suddenly bereft of what kept her grounded. "We need to climb."

Another roar - far too close - shook her to her core and Clarke didn't hesitate. She gripped the edge of the first rock and heaved herself up. She wasn't a climber, wasn't made for this, but hands on her back steadied her and when her sweaty fingers almost slipped off the second ledge, Lexa was there to push her up the rest of the way.

She'd barely scrambled to her feet when the earth beneath their feet began to rumble. Not the subtle, ominous rumble of before. This was the kind that made her knees shake and threatened to make her lose her footing.

And then Clarke saw it. The tree tops rustled and the beast was bigger, much bigger than she'd first thought.

Next to her, Lexa breathed in shakily and drew her sword. Clarke wanted to grab her hand again, make use of the safety Alpha pheromones promised, but she opted for her gun instead.

She didn't need to be a good shot to hit a target this big.

If she'd thought the stone wall would prove to be a hindrance to it, she'd been wrong. A large, dark-furred hand (a hand, not a paw) appeared on top of the wall to pull its body up and over it with ease and then it was upon them.

A gorilla - much larger than Clarke could have ever imagine from books alone, much angrier than she'd ever wanted to imagine it.

Her hands shook in cold panic and she gripped the handle of the gun tighter. Lexa did the same, widening her stance as though her sword would be any help in this fight.

The gorilla fixed them with beady eyes and Clarke did not doubt for a single second that this was it. It would kill them, maybe for food, maybe for sport.

It roared again and charged, suddenly appearing in front of them, and Clarke's fingers moved on instinct.

She pulled the trigger, once, twice, as often as it took to get it away from them. The gun blasts almost drowned out the animal's growls and Clarke took comfort in it.

It fell with an angry howl, though Clarke knew it was from surprise rather than any real damage she'd done.

She looked around for an escape route, seeing only one way off this rock. This time, she did grab Lexa's hand, pulling her swiftly towards the ledge furthest away from the rabid beast.

"We need to jump," she panted, glancing at the Commander out of the corners of her eyes. Lexa was blinking at her, wide-eyed and surprised, and Clarke squeezed the hand in hers tighter for a moment before letting go.

She didn't give herself time to think it over, not when she already thought she could feel the gorilla's breath cascading over her back, and jumped.

The fall didn't last forever like she'd thought it would. Clarke had barely registered being in the air before her feet hit the ground and a tremor of pain raced up her legs from the impact.
"Lexa!" She looked up expectantly once she was sure everything was intact. "Come on!"

The Alpha hesitated only a moment to shoot a quick glance over her shoulder before following after her.

Clarke saw the disaster even before it happened, saw how Lexa's body twisted all wrong and her balance shifted too far towards her front.

Lexa hit the ground and crumbled, her shoulder - the same shoulder that had just recovered from an arrow wound - crashing hard into concrete, and Clarke felt her gasp of pain down to her bones.

"Shit. Come on, come on, we can't stay here," she panted, pulling the Alpha to her feet as best she could. "There's a small gate over there, can you get there?"

Lexa's jaw flexed as she nodded and Clarke realized she had never seen her truly afraid before.

They hobbled over to the gate, Clarke's urgency only fueled by the quiet, pained breaths next to her.

A howl announced their impending death.

The gate was too small for two people and Clarke scrambled through it, reaching out a sweaty hand to help the Commander along.

Maybe if Lexa hadn't been hurt, they would have been fast enough. If her shoulder wasn't probably dislocated or if she hadn't spent the last weeks recuperating from being shot with an arrow-

But it didn't matter, because they weren't. The ground threatened to fall apart beneath them and an impossibly large hand took a hold of the Alpha's leg.

Lexa's sharp cry of surprise propelled Clarke into action.

She snatched her uninjured arm, bracing both of her feet against the wall to either side of the gate, and pulled.

She knew she was no match for the brute strength of her opponent and the groan of pain from the Commander told her she might be doing more harm than good, but she couldn't let go of her.

"Just leave me, Clarke," Lexa pressed out between her teeth, grimacing at being pulled into two directions at once. "It's alright, just run."

"Forget it," Clarke grunted and re-doubled her efforts. She may be an Omega and she may not possess the strength or combat expertise of an Alpha, but she wouldn't let Lexa die, not on her watch. "I told you we're in this together."

Her arms began to shake from the exhaustion of keeping Lexa tethered and she gritted her teeth in frustration. "And you're not allowed to leave me to fight a war all by myself, understood?"

She took a deep breath and let go.

The confusion on Lexa's face lasted for only a second as Clarke pulled out her gun, aimed carefully and fired three shots into the dark mass of skin beyond the gate.

Clarke's ears rang, but she didn't dare wait. As soon as the beast had reared back in shock, she slipped her arms around Lexa's shoulders and helped her scramble through the gate.

Almost as an after-thought, Clarke kicked the wooden stick keeping the gate open away. She was
the first on her feet, slinging Lexa's arm across her shoulder.

"It will come back," Lexa huffed, struggling to keep up with her.

Clarke grimaced, steering them quickly towards an open doorway. "I know."

As soon as Clarke had jammed Lexa's sword through the door handles, she let out a breath. The first one in what seemed like forever.

She knew it wouldn't hold forever, not unless the beast got bored, but they were safe for now.

Lexa drew in a shaky breath from her position leaned against a piece of debris and shifted, grimacing when it didn't ease her pain.

"Here, let me see that," Clarke said, kneeling in front of the Commander and reaching out to take hold of her arm.

Lexa flinched and Clarke tried not to let it get to her. "You didn't make a fuss when I treated your arrow wound. Don't start now."

Reluctantly, and no doubt helped by the generous amount of healing Omega pheromones, the Alpha relaxed and allowed her to inspect her injury.

"Your shoulder is dislocated," Clarke stated, confirming her own suspicions. "I can pop it back in, but it'll hurt."

Almost immediately, Lexa retreated. "No need. If we survive, Nyko can do it."

By now familiar anger was starting to bubble up in Clarke's gut. Lexa wasn't just being stubborn, she was being wilfully nonsensical.

"You're hurt and there's a gorilla banging at the door," she intoned coldly. "If we want to survive, you need to be able to move freely."

Lessa growled, an angry spark lighting up her eyes. "If you wanted to survive, you should have left me and run."

Clarke didn't know if it was the beginnings of rut talking, and she didn't care. She wasn't going to take it.

"I saved your life." She pointed at the Alpha's chest with darkly furrowed brows. "And the appropriate response is 'thank you'."

"We didn't both have to die," Lexa answered evasively, turning her head away.

Clarke blinked at her, disbelief warring with ire in her stomach.

"What is wrong with you? Everytime I think we might have reached some sort of understanding, you turn around and close up on me. Everytime I think we might actually be friends, you go ahead and do everything in your power to prove me wrong. I'm tired of it, Lexa."

Friends. Clarke hadn't ever quite consciously thought of them in those terms, but it was true. She'd thought they'd been becoming friends.

After everything that happened, after the the lake and Gustus and despite their disagreements and
their biology working against them, Clarke thought they had a shot.

The Commander's shoulders shook, but she didn't look her way and Clarke couldn't tell if it was more than pain that caused the reaction.

She sighed and was about to get up when Lexa groaned and covered her face with a shaking hand. 

"I was embarrassed," she muttered reluctantly into her palm. "That's why I didn't tell you about my rut."

"What?"

The skin that peeked out from beneath the Alpha's fingers was curiously red. "I should not be going into rut, not this early in the year. But being near you without being able to- without mating you caused it. I did not want my lack of control to affect you, so I thought it would be better to avoid you for the time being."

Clarke fought the urge to take her by the shoulders and give her a hearty shake. "You resisted me even when I was in heat. You're the last person I'd accuse of having no control over her urges."

"But I don't," Lexa's head snapped towards her as she growled and suddenly the Alpha was back, dark and hungry and lurking just behind her pupils. "I assaulted you, Clarke."

Clarke very suddenly remembered the feeling of having Lexa pressed against her so intimately, of the heat her skin gave off, the solid weight of her, and she tampered down the awareness that her body had gone unsatisfied with a sharp intake of breath.

Lexa seemed to interpret her reaction as agreement and ducked her head, swallowing. "You should have left me back there," she said very quietly, wrapping an arm around her middle and flinching at the pain in her shoulder.

Clarke sat back on her heels, furrowing her brow. "That's what you're worried about? What happened after you beat Quint?"

"What I did to you after I beat Quint."

"I didn't exactly fight you off, Lexa." It hadn't taken much convincing at all to get her to respond. If anything, Clarke had encouraged her.

Lexa growled. "I didn't give you a choice. My scent affects you. It causes you to desire things you would not want under normal circumstances."

The unspoken like me hung in the air between them. Clarke couldn't argue because the Commander's statement was entirely true. Lexa's pheromones affected her a great deal, far more than she'd anticipated, and they did make her want things she'd never felt a particular need for.

She'd never wanted an Alpha in her entire life, not the educated, polite ones on the Ark and not the delinquents sent to earth. But now she did.

Clarke was just starting to wonder whether she could really blame all of it on pheromones.

"I'm dangerous to you, especially during this time. Even now, I - " Lexa stopped and shook her head. "You had every right to leave me to my fate. It would have given you a chance to run, to survive."
"I didn't let that arrow kill you," Clarke reminded her. "And I'm not going to let you die now."

"You may think you need me to win this war, but that's not true. My death may cause chaos for a time, but my successor will be chosen soon enough."

"This alliance is shot if one of your Generals becomes the new Commander, you know that."

Lexa almost chuckled, but was soon overtaken by a pained grimace as she tried to shift to alleviate the pain of her dislocated shoulder. "My soul will choose much more wisely than that."

Reincarnation, Clarke remembered. It tied into their beliefs of life after death, of the sky holding the souls of their departed. Clarke herself wasn't sure whether she could believe that such a thing was possible.

Lexa sighed, her jaw clenching at the sound of something heavy pounding against the door. It held and probably would for some time, or so Clarke hoped.

"Clarke, if there is a chance for you to survive this, or if there ever is another situation in which I can't go on, you have to leave me," Lexa said, staring imploringly into her eyes. "You cannot allow yourself to be weak."

Clarke bit the inside of her cheek. Then she shook her head. "No."

The Alpha reared back. "No?"

"No. I won't leave people behind."

Lexa frowned, a hint of disbelief colouring her features. "I told you, my soul will-"

"This is not about your successor," Clarke hissed. "This is about you."

Before the Commander could go on another lecture about the duties of a leader, Clarke breathed in deeply and let the lines of her face soften.

"I don't want you to die. Not just because I need you to save my people, but because," she hesitated, unreasonably afraid that her offer would be thrown back in her face. "I want to be your friend. I want to be able to treat your injuries without having to force you into it. I want you to talk to me."

Clarke knew that she was a mess. Her actions, her responsibilities, all of it weighted on her, crushing the air out of her lungs. When Bellamy had asked her what she wanted, whether it was Finn or peace or something else entirely, she hadn't been able to answer.

But what crystallized from the jumbled mess that was her mind was one very simple desire - she wanted Lexa to consider her not just as an equal, but as a friend, regardless of their circumstances.

Lexa seemed to deflate, all the air going out of her with a single harsh breath. Her mouth opened, but nothing came out, and Clarke took the opportunity to reach for the Alpha's arm again.

The Commander didn't protest this time. A dislocated shoulder was a minor injury, but Clarke still took care to keep her grip gentle as she rotated the arm in the same patterns her mother had taught her. Lexa clenched her teeth and grunted at the treatment.

There was a barely audible pop as the joint slipped back into its original position and a sigh of relief from her patient.
Clarke used a long cloth from her bag, one she'd made from scraps at one point should they be in need of a quick bandage, to tie the Commander's arm into an immobile position. "Try to keep it still for now."

"Thank you," Lexa said softly.

An uncomfortable silence stretched between them, Clarke waiting for an answer and Lexa apparently not quite sure what to say. Even the pounding at the door had ceased for now, most likely due to the beast contemplating how to proceed.

"I don't-," Lexa began, looking down at the dusty concrete between them, and Clarke suppressed her apprehension. "I don't believe I would be a very good friend."

Before she could think to retreat, the Alpha had reached out and took a hold of Clarke's hand still resting against her arm.

Clarke blinked at the unexpected pain the motion brought. She hadn't noticed until now, but the palms of her hands were scratched and raw from where she'd slipped against the bark.

Lexa carefully turned Clarke's hand until it rested palm-up in hers.

"Friends are not something easily maintained for someone in my position." Her hand twitched and Clarke's heart constricted as she recalled their first meeting, how Lexa hadn't quite been able to meet her eyes as she'd asked about Anya's death. "I wouldn't remember how to be one."

Clarke wondered, then, how long it had been since Lexa had had a friend. If she'd had anyone to share her burdens with since she became Commander or if she'd been forced to walk this path alone all these years. Gustus would go to the ends of the earth for her, but he didn’t seem the type to offer comfort.

Lexa laid her hand into her lap and reached for Clarke's bag, taking out the salve Clarke had used to treat the wounds on her face.

"Life is easier with friends, Lexa. With people who care for you," Clarke insisted. The Alpha breathed in deeply before uncapping the tin, dipping a finger into the mixture and dabbing it over the shallow scrapes on Clarke's palm. She managed it with a surprisingly little amount of fuss, considering one of her arms was still caught in the make-shift sling.

It felt strange to have her wounds get taken care of by someone other than her mother. Strange, but not unpleasant.

"I don't know if I could have made it this far without them," Clarke continued, unwittingly relaxing into the Alpha's touch. "If I hadn't had Bellamy to help me, I would have cracked under the pressure."

Lexa nodded stiffly and began to take care of Clarke's other hand. Clarke knew it was most likely her rut at play, her hormones telling her to take care of the injured Omega, but she allowed herself to enjoy the simple contact anyway.

"You have been through a lot together," Lexa murmured, her increasingly active hormones turning her tone harsh as she ceased her ministrations and deposited the ointment back in the bag. "You are lucky to have someone to watch your back."

There was a slight sheen of sweat building on her skin. It was caused by her Alpha instincts being triggered rather than by pain, Clarke could tell by the smell in the air.
"Maybe I should sit over there." She started to rise slowly, aware that she’d have to be careful around Lexa in the coming days. An Alpha in rut could be set off by even innocent, unintentional behavioural patterns, like a quick movement that could be interpreted as an attempt to flee.

A light touch to her elbow made her stop in her tracks.

"It's easier when I can smell you," Lexa explained with a strained exhale. "I...marked you with my scent earlier and it keeps my urges dormant. At least until my rut sets in more fully."

It was a very roundabout way of asking her to stay, but Clarke nodded anyway and settled down next to the Commander, their arms touching slightly.

It was deceptively quiet and Clarke blinked against the setting sun above them. If the beast outside was resting, it wouldn't be for long.

Lexa rotated the wrist of the arm hanging inside the sling and Clarke's eyes caught on the empty space.

"You haven't worn Anya's braid since the wedding," she stated quietly. She took care to not phrase it like a question or a demand for more information.

They had talked of many topics in the weeks since their union, but some things had remained out of reach, things Clarke had been hesitant to share and hesitant to ask. It was up to Lexa now to accept or deny her offer.

The Alpha was silent for a long moment. Then, she reached into the collar of her shirt to pull out a neatly-kept braid tied to a string and held it up.

"It would be impractical in battle to wear it around my wrist. Impractical and sentimental."

"So you wear it hidden under your clothes."

_Above your heart_, Clarke thought, but didn't say. She remembered Lexa telling her that emotions made her weak. That she could not afford them. Yet despite her opinions on the matter, the Commander hadn't been able to let go of the memory of someone she'd held dear, keeping the last piece of it tucked away like a shameful secret.

"Anya would not have approved." Her voice was grave, but there was a hint of a wistful smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "She always did scold me for being too soft."

Lexus's features eased as she talked, the effects of adrenaline and her rut lessening as she got lost in memories.

"Tell me about her," Clarke asked, pulling her legs to her chest and laying her cheek against them. "How did you become her Second?"

The Alpha rubbed her thumb over the strands of hair in her palm. "I've always known her, I suppose. We were born in the same village, though we did not really meet until I was in my ninth summer."

"Why only then?"

Here she hesitated. "My parents died the year before, on a hunting trip."

Clarke swallowed. Lexa had never talked about her family, not even in passing. She supposed it was just how she avoided talking about her father.
"You were eight when they died?"

The Commander nodded. "Yes. I was alone for a while, trying to contribute on my own. They wouldn't allow me to go hunting or train with the others and I was terrible at most everything else." She huffed, rubbing the bridge of her nose in a gesture of embarrassment. "I still am."

The admission made Clarke smile slightly. "Why wouldn't they let you train?"

She would have thought they'd welcome anyone wishing to become a warrior. The hint of amusement dropped from Lexa's face.

"I was a runt," she stated. "I was too small and too skinny to be a warrior. I couldn't even braid my own hair, much less hold a sword."

Clarke's brow furrowed at the term 'runt'. She'd never heard it applied to the Alphas on the Ark, but it rubbed her the wrong way. "But you were just a kid."

"I was an Alpha. An Alpha without a family, without a pack, and no skills to speak of. They were right to cast me aside."

The Commander nodded, as though to reaffirm her belief - or to convince herself.

"So how did you meet Anya?" Clarke probed, redirecting the conversation into less dangerous waters.

"I used to watch the warriors train. One day, she stopped in the middle of a sparring session and approached me."

The smile returned and Clarke marveled at how different it made her look, how her nose crinkled just the tiniest bit.

"Did she speak to you?"

"Not quite," Lexa chuckled. "She took me aside to braid my hair."

Clarke blinked. "Your hair?"

"Yes." The Alpha curled her hand into a fist. "I had no one to braid it for me since my parents' passing and I could never get it to look like that of the other children. It was quite a mess."

A knot formed in Clarke's throat as she thought of a little girl, all elbows and messy brown curls, trying desperately to make herself look presentable.

"Her exact words were 'A warrior ought to present herself as such', I believe." Lexa bent her head back to look up at the first flecks of light emerging from the darkening sky. "I asked her once why she took pity on me that day when no one else would give me so much as a chance. She told me she valued commitment far more than she valued brute strength."

Clarke watched her profile as she talked, tracing the straight line of her nose and the angular curve of her jaw with attentive eyes. Hard planes and delicate softness blended into each other seamlessly, from the fullness of her lips to her high cheekbones and with a start, Clarke realized that Lexa was beautiful.

It shouldn't have surprised her as much as it did, she supposed. She'd known it already, of course she had. It was impossible not to notice that Lexa was attractive by all standards, Clarke simply hadn't
acknowledged it consciously until now.

She'd just been the Commander at first, the leader of the people that had caused them so much grief, then she'd been the Alpha Clarke had married for the sake of the alliance, but she'd never quite been just a woman.

A gorgeous woman with heavy shoulders and her heart tucked safely away beneath bones and flesh and skin.

"Anya was a strict teacher and she pushed me far beyond anything I thought I was capable of. She taught me to read my enemy as easily as I would read my allies." Lexa smiled sadly. "She was hard, but she was also kind. Kinder, perhaps, than she should have been. She cared."

Clarke couldn't quite reconcile Lexa's description with the image she had in her mind, but then again, she hadn't known Anya long, certainly not well enough to consider her more than a reluctant ally.

"It sounds like you were close."

Looking at the affection in the sad slopes of the Commander's expression, a part of Clarke wondered whether there had been more to their relationship than just teacher and student. She discarded the troubling thought just as quickly, but Lexa recognized the curiosity in her eyes.

"We were never more than friends, if that is what you're wondering. I suppose I did come to admire her greatly, maybe as more than a mentor, in my years as her Second, but it was a mere infatuation and she'd always made it clear that our relationship would remain as it was," she explained, and Clarke felt strangely lighter to hear it. She didn't want to consider the guilt she would have felt if her people hadn't just killed Lexa's friend, but her lover.

"A relationship between a First and her Second would have been considered inappropriate. And it wasn't long until I met-" The Commander's words broke off abruptly.

"Until you met Costia?" Clarke guessed gently, inching closer until they were pressed together. Lexa nodded, but didn't continue, lost somewhere in her own mind.

Clarke started talking to fill the silence. "Back on the Ark, I grew up with a boy. Wells was his name."

Her words drew Lexa's attention and the Alpha cocked her head, listening intently.

"Every memory I have of the Ark, he's there. He was one of those kids who always cried at the drop of a hat, even if there was no real reason to. I used to make fun of him for it, but I'd always get so angry when someone made him sad."

The familiar images tore at Clarke's chest. "I was disappointed when he got taller than me because it meant he wouldn't need me to protect him anymore. He told me then that it just meant it was time to repay the favour."

Tears stung at the edges of her eyes as she remembered his wide, proud smile when she'd told him she trusted him to do just that.

"And he never once stopped trying to keep me safe, even from myself. He let me blame him for my father's death, just so I wouldn't have to hate my Mom," Clarke rasped and she hadn't realized a tear had started to roll down her cheek until soft fingertips came to rest against the side of her face and a calloused thumb swiped the wetness away.
Lexa retreated after the gesture, but it wasn't a hasty movement, as if she wanted to make sure Clarke didn't take it as a rejection.

Clarke took a deep breath and blinked away the remaining tears. "He came to Earth for me, to protect me, and he died for it. Killed by one of our own for being the wrong man's son."

"I'm sorry to hear it," Lexa said earnestly. "He must have been a good man."

Clarke nodded and tightened her grip on her knees. "He was. One of the best I ever knew. But good men don't make it long down here."

She looked up through the bars above them at the emerging stars. It was comforting, to think Wells might be looking down at her now, protecting her even in death, and she couldn't blame the Grounders for wanting to believe in it.

"You once asked me whether I believed that the stars hold the souls of our dead," Lexa said hesitantly and Clarke glanced at her to see that she was looking up as well.

"I did."

The sound of something heavy bumping into the door made her flinch, reminding her that there was a beast lurking right outside that would sooner or later figure out that the door wouldn't hold.

The Commander didn't seem to have heard it, still watching the stars. "I want to believe in it. I want to look up at the sky and feel like they are still with me, but I don't. I see a whole world beyond here, but I don't see them."

Clarke followed Lexa's line of sight, focusing on the sky above. What did she see when she looked up at what had once been her home?

She saw vastness, a never-ending sea of lights. But she also saw death and pain, saw her father's face as he disappeared, heard the echoes of the victims this black abyss had claimed. The sky held no hope for her, and for all that the ground had taken from them all, she did not regret leaving.

"Maybe you don't have to," she murmured. "Maybe it's okay to keep hurting."

Lexa breathed in sharply and turned to look at her, just for a moment, but it was enough to let Clarke see a shimmer in her eyes.

Another bump against the door made them both stiffen, but when nothing else followed, Lexa closed her eyes and released the breath she'd been holding. "I met her when I was fourteen."

Clarke didn't have to ask who she was.

"She was part of a diplomatic mission from another tribe. Anya was gone at the time and I had been left behind to help forge weapons." Lexa shook her head. "I was not very good at it. I would constantly cut myself on the blades or let the knife slip while carving bows."

The Commander was never anything but graceful and Clarke had a hard time imagining her being clumsy at anything, much less handling weapons.

Lexa raised her hand, the bumps on her palm visible even in the low light of the stars. "They never quite faded."

Before she could think to stop herself, Clarke had grasped the hand in hers and was tracing the small
white lines with the tips of her fingers. The Alpha tensed, but did not pull back.

"So that's where you got the scars."

It was charming, in a way, to think she carried around a reminder of her youthful failures.

Lexa nodded haltingly, fingers twitching. "Most of them, yes. Costia saw that I was struggling and offered to help. It was my task to complete and most would have looked down on her for making such an offer in the first place, but she didn't care what they thought. She never did."

Her words were brittle, like she didn't quite know how to form the words.

The skin beneath Clarke's fingers suddenly felt cold to the touch, the hand in hers heavy, and she let it drop awkwardly. The scars on Lexa's palm were a part of her history with Costia and Clarke irrevocably and irrationally felt like she'd done wrong to have touched them, even if it had just been a gesture of curiosity.

"I fell in love with her. We didn't see each other again until after I'd been called to lead my people, but when we did, she agreed to stay with me instead of return to her tribe."

Years worth of aching memories played across her face then and Clarke did not ask her to elaborate. Some memories were too personal, too precious to be released into the world.

"What happened to her?"

The muscles in Lexa's jaw hardened, her breath quickening, but her voice was controlled as she answered. "It wasn't easy between us. She was strong, but gentle, and didn't approve of many of my decisions as Commander. We had an argument, she left and was captured."

Her last words came out in a rush, like she'd stop if she took a breath. "The next time I saw her was when they delivered me her head. They'd shaved off her hair."

Clarke's eyes widened. They had denied Lexa that last, traditional keepsake and she could only guess it had been a calculated move, meant to hurt and torment.

"I'm sorry." It seemed insufficient, but Clarke didn't know what else to say. Everything she came up with would only pull unwanted memories to the surface.

"Thank you," Lexa whispered anyway and her shoulders seemed not quite so heavy, like it had done her good to be able to talk about it. Clarke wondered if she had been the first to hear the story from the Commander's own mouth.

A sudden pounding disrupted the comfortable silence, far louder and far more aggressive than the last.

"It's back," Lexa stated, as calm and in-control as she'd ever been, and got to her feet abruptly. Clarke followed after and the Alpha stretched out her good arm, brows lowered and teeth bared. The relaxed version from before was gone, replaced by the Alpha, and her pheromones thickened as her instincts kicked in. "Stay behind me."

"What are you going to do?"

The Commander unsheathed her dagger from where it was strapped to her belt to hold it at the ready. "I'm hurt, easy prey. While the beast is focused on me, you will run."
The loud noise of a massive body slamming against metal continued, intensified, and the Commander's sword gave a pitiful creak as it threatened to bend under the force.

Clarke fought against a sudden onslaught of fear and shook her head. "No, I already told you I won't leave you behind."

"It will kill us both," Lexa growled. "We cannot lock the door from the inside and my sword will not hold it back."

The metal of the weapon glimmered as it started to fold.

"Then we'll find some other way to-"

Clarke stopped.

"The lock," she breathed. "There's a lock on the outside."

She grabbed Lexa's elbow and pulled her towards the door, positioning them just beside it. Pressed against the wall, every hard push from the gorilla sent a small earthquake up their legs.

"If we lead it in here and get out fast enough, we can lock it in," she explained quickly at the Alpha's questioning stare. "Even if it manages to escape, we'll be long gone by then."

Lexa only just managed to nod before the door hinges squeaked threateningly and the heavy metal door burst open, hurling her ruined sword towards the other end of the room. The momentum of its rage caused the gorilla to ram through the doorway just as Clarke had hoped, the black mass of fur and flesh stumbling in its haste to get to its next meal.

"Now!" she whispered sharply and hurried through the open doorway, Lexa close on her heels. The beast blinked in confusion when it found the back of the room empty and turned on its heels, roaring out in displeasure.

The door closed with a loud clang as they desperately pushed against it, anxious sweat building on Clarke's forehead. Just as the latch had fallen, the angry animal crashed against the other side, madly slamming into the door.

It showed no signs of budging.

Clarke breathed out shakily, closing her eyes in relief. They were safe.

Her quick heartbeat showed no signs of stopping as long as they weren't as far away from here as possible, but they were safe.

"We should get going."

She caught Lexa's gaze and her breath stuttered in her throat at the look in her eyes. They held an odd shimmer again, albeit with a strangely different light behind them, and still, Clarke could not decipher the meaning.

It was frustrating, and she averted her eyes when the Alpha blinked and fidgeted at her stare.

"We should. It's too dark to go back to the village, but we should bring some distance between us and this place before we make camp," Lexa confirmed, starting to walk towards the exit. She was favouring her right foot, most likely a result of their earlier jump.

Clarke slipped a hand around her elbow to support her, waiting to see whether she would protest.
When Lexa's only response was a barely noticeable nod, Clarke tightened her grip and led the way.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

In which plans get made, someone gets bitten and inappropriate bits are touched.

They stopped as soon as the broken structure of what had almost become their tomb was out of sight. It was silent around them as they gathered wood for a fire and piled it high next to a fallen tree.

Back at the dropship, it had always been someone else who'd been responsible for the fire and it took Clarke a few frustrating tries and some patient pointers from Lexa to get suitably big flames going.

Once there was nothing more to do but lie down and get some sleep, Clarke yawned.

"Do you want me to take first watch?" she asked nonetheless. She knew that bouts of rage could burn an Alpha out and after the thing with Quint and the conversation they'd had, not to mention her hurt shoulder, Lexa had to be exhausted.

The Commander shook her head and settled down against the tree trunk, laying her hand on the handle of her knife. "No, don't worry about me. Get some sleep."

At Clarke's raised eyebrow, she elaborated. "I have more energy than I know what to do with, since-" She broke off and Clarke sucked in a breath.

Alphas usually dealt with their rut in one of two ways: Mating or Fighting. Since neither one of those was an option for Lexa at the moment, it was safe to assume that she was telling the truth.

"Still," Clarke argued. "You need sleep."

"So do you." The Alpha's face softened when Clarke raised a stubborn eyebrow. "I'll wake you once it's time for your shift."

If her eyelids weren't threatening to drop now that the adrenaline and fear had left her, Clarke might have tried to discuss this further, but instead she simply laid down on the ground - a spot that thankfully wasn't muddy - and attempted to calm her restless mind.

It wasn't working.

Despite the itching behind her eyes and the heaviness of her limbs, she couldn't help but keep her ears open for the occasional distant roar, the noise keeping her alert and nervous.

The cold was especially harsh at night and without so much as a blanket, it made goosebumps rise on her skin. Even after scooting as close to the fire as she dared, the slight breeze caused her to shudder periodically. Despite having spent months on Earth, the rapidly changing temperatures were strange to her. The Ark had always been kept at the perfect temperature, not too warm and not too cold, and the oncoming winter proved to be difficult to adjust to.

She noticed the smell before she felt it. Lexa's warm scent covered her like a cloud as a long coat was draped over her shivering form.
"I'm used to the cold," the Alpha muttered. She straightened, but did not move away. Her next words were quiet, hesitant, rolling off her tongue in carefully enunciated words.

"I...would very much like to be your friend, Clarke of the Sky People. In whatever capacity I can."

Clarke blinked up at her owlishly, and Lexa retreated with a small nod and a nervous smile, returning to her spot against the fallen tree.

Clarke breathed in deeply, feeling her muscles relax as the Alpha musk suffused her senses. It drew a slight reaction from her, the muscles in her lower belly tightening for just a moment, but she was too tired to fall back into the pit of unfulfilled arousal.

She pulled the piece of clothing tighter around her shoulders until it covered her nose and closed her eyes. It was still warm from Lexa's body heat.

Another far-off cry of rage sounded, but it barely reached Clarke's ears. Her inner Omega was comfortable and warm and she knew that Lexa would be keeping a close eye on things, no matter how tired she may get.

Before she knew it, Clarke had nodded off.

A gasp was all that broke from her lips as Clarke jerked awake, sitting up and turning her head to take in her surroundings. There was a short moment in which she couldn't quite remember where she was, couldn't quite remember why she wasn't still in TonDC bundled up on the floor or left to curl up in the Commander's bed, until a raspy voice broke her out of her confusion.

"You're safe."

She turned to look at Lexa, who was still sitting in the same spot. The sun had risen and all that was left of the fire were glowing embers. Clarke frowned.

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"Your sleep was calm and undisturbed. It's a privilege you don't get to enjoy too often, it seems."

It was true - Clarke didn't often get a good night's rest, her mind too preoccupied with things she couldn't change and things she was afraid she could, but she hadn't thought Lexa would know about that. She'd never given an indication that she'd noticed Clarke twisting and turning in her sleep.

"I would not have been able to sleep anyway," the Alpha continued, her grip on the hilt of her dagger momentarily tightening.

She was sweating, Clarke noticed then, a sense of unspent energy making her legs tremble and her teeth grind.

"Your rut is getting worse," she stated. "Can I help?"

Lexa sucked in a sharp breath and closed her eyes for a long moment, obviously fighting the urge to follow what Clarke realized now - with some embarrassment - could be considered an open invitation.

"No," she finally answered, her shoulders lowering stiffly. "I can train with my warriors as soon as we get back. It's not too bad when I can exert myself."
Clarke nodded. There wasn't much she could do for her, except try and not trigger her instincts. She knew Lexa wouldn't ask her to not spend more time than necessary with other Alphas or keep herself covered in the Commander's scent as much as she could, but Clarke was willing to at least attempt to make it easier on her friend.

Friend.

The word sounded strange even in her own head, especially applied to someone she was married to.

"How's your arm?" she asked and crawled over to the other woman, shaking off the odd feeling in her chest.

"Hurts." The Alpha's answer was brief and she held her breath as Clarke settled down next to her. "It will pass."

Clarke took the extra coat and slipped it back around Lexa's shoulders, noting with some disapproval that her skin was cold to the touch.

"You shouldn't move it too much until you feel comfortable," she said and grasped her by the elbow, slowly rotating the limb in the sling to gauge her reaction. When the twitch of a dark eyebrow was the only visible sign of discomfort, Clarke hummed. "It wasn't a bad dislocation, I think. Sparring might not be the best idea, but if it helps your relax and you don't strain yourself too much, it shouldn't do further harm. Just try to avoid dislocating it again."

If it was up to her, she'd bar Lexa from any further activity until she was sure she wouldn't get herself into anymore trouble, but they both knew there were bigger things at stake.

"Are your Generals still insisting on attacking Mt. Weather head-on?"

Almost losing their lives had distracted Clarke, but they still had to work out a plan. Bellamy was on his way into the maw of the beast, but his work might be for naught if the Grounders decided to disregard her idea and employ more drastic measures.

"They are," Lexa confirmed, slipping back into her role as easily as pulling on her armour. "And they are right, Clarke. Waiting for one man is not a plan."

The corners of Clarke's mouth twitched downwards. "So you'd just let all those children die?"

The Commander raised her chin and sighed, regret flashing in her eyes. "If I have to decide between my people - friends, family - and the children of my enemies, however innocent they may be," Her gaze found Clarke's and there was nothing but steely resolve in them now. "Then I will choose my people. Always."

Clarke understood the sentiment and almost resented herself for it. She was the one who had burned 300 of Lexa's warriors, brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, to protect the people she cared about.

And if she was confronted with the same decision today, if the Mountain Men came upon them, she knew she would choose exactly as before.

"You have seen them, Clarke," Lexa said softly. "You said it yourself. My people are trapped in cages, bled so the Mountain Men can live. There is no good and bad in a war, just survival. And as leaders, we have to do whatever we must to protect those that put their faith in us."

Clarke blinked, the spark of something tickling at the back of her brain. Lexa flinched when her head
suddenly whipped up. "Lexa, I have an idea."

She gestured towards the mountain rising above the treeline. "We don't have to attack them head-on. If Bellamy can get inside, he can free your people. There must be hundreds of them in there, just waiting for an opportunity to escape."

A smile spread across her face as the Alpha's eyes widened in contemplation, the possibilities Clarke had running through her head reflected right back at her.

"They have an army right under their noses and they don't even know it," she explained.

Lesa's lips tugged into a smile of her own, inclining her head in a show of respect. "Now that, Clarke of the Sky People, is a plan."

Clarke knew she didn't have to explain further, lay out all the new possibilities this realization brought them, the hope it stirred in her, because Lexa felt the same need to bring her people back as she did. Lexa got it, that pressure in her chest everytime she thought of her friends, the anticipation tingling beneath her skin now that they had an edge over the previously so untouchable force of Mt. Weather.

Clarke felt a sudden and inexplicable urge to throw her arms around Lexa's neck and pull her into a hug.

She squashed the notion as quickly as it had appeared, blaming it on the Alpha pheromones affecting her, and instead settled for giving the Commander's upper arm a squeeze.

"We should go," Lexa said, shifting. "We need to inform my Generals of the plan and make all necessary arrangements."

Clarke made no move to get up. "One last thing. Quint."

"One way or another, he won't attack you again." The Commander's face hardened, her knuckles white. "If he survived, he will not be welcome in any village he might seek refuge in. I have said before that I will not tolerate anyone threatening my mate and I stand by that."

Clarke's smile faltered.

"Are you sure?" she asked and cleared her throat when it came out less casual than she'd intended. She remembered Gustus' words to her very well, just as she remembered her own doubts regarding their union. "Quint already found us out and other people won't be too far behind, if they don't know already. We haven't mated, so there's nothing stopping us from not pretending anymore."

The Alpha's jaw twitched as she glanced away, into the cooling embers of the fire. "I will release you from the union as soon as we are back, if you so desire."

"That's not it," Clarke argued and Lexa blinked at her questioningly. "Being treated like your mate has more than enough benefits for me. I just thought you..." The flash of a memory - Lexa looking pointedly away as Quint hovered above her during the War Council - sparked through her head. "I thought you might be tired of having to protect me."

Clarke wasn't helpless. Never had been. It wasn't in her nature to sit back and watch as other people decided over her life and she'd never been anything close to a damsel in distress, but she'd had to learn very early on that some things couldn't be avoided when one was an Omega.

If Sex Ed on the Ark hadn't clued her in, the derisive and lustful glances she'd garnered from the
moment she'd started her first heat, the moment she'd reached sexual maturity - the right age to *breed* - would have.

However capable she was, however much her friends respected her, there would always be people like Quint who saw her as a threat or a victim. And her biology ensured that she was all but helpless against them.

Clarke hadn't mentioned the council and wasn't planning to, but recognition lit up Lexa's eyes anyway. Her head jerked, eyes widening, like she hadn't even *considered* what Clarke was asking of her now.

"I didn't keep from stepping in to *punish* you, Clarke," Lexa asserted, brows heavy above green eyes. "And certainly not because you are a burden to me. My Generals will not respect those who have not earned it. They don't respect those unwilling to fight for what they believe in, but you stood up to Quint and have proven yourself worthy."

Her voice dropped, a hint of buried rage glimmering in her eyes that made Clarke shift in her seat. "He would not have gotten away with his insolence otherwise."

The weight on Clarke's shoulders lifted. She didn't like feeling this way, she didn't like that she had to feel this way, but being an Omega had always been about hoping and praying for an Alpha's protection.

And she'd gotten a much better deal than she'd ever anticipated, she mused as she looked at the Commander from the corners of her eyes.

"So, we're gonna keep it up?" she asked hesitantly. "We're going to stay married?"

"If you are willing."

*For now,* a dark voice whispered in the recesses of Clarke's mind. Lexa would still divorce her once the dust had settled; she'd given no indication otherwise.

Clarke couldn't help but wonder what would become of her then, once she was no longer off-limits.

"We'll have to act it up, though. Otherwise someone else will find out sooner or later." She paused. "Will you be okay with that? Acting like we're actually a couple?"

The Alpha chuckled lightly, shaking her head. "I believe I should be asking you that."

Clarke had already pondered that particular question and come to the conclusion that it couldn't be worse than usual. With Lexa's scent covering her every hour of every day, some casual touching shouldn't have that great of an effect on her.

"I'm fine with it," Clarke assured her. "It's necessary. Short of having you with me at all times, this might be the best way to make sure our union is seen as air-tight."

Lessa lowered her head, studying her hands for a long moment before she cleared her throat. "There is one other thing we could try, if you feel comfortable with it."

Her gaze slid over Clarke's mouth and chin, only to get caught on the column of her throat. Clarke swallowed instinctively and watched as the Commander followed the movement.

"I could bite you," she finished quickly, giving a short shake of her head. "It would be a more visible claim than just my scent."
Observing the pump of blood against the Alpha's pulse point and her dilated pupils, Clarke knew that the offer, while sensible, was caused by her hormones. It was a good plan, but Lexa would not have proposed it under normal circumstances, if her body wasn't telling her to mark an Omega as hers.

Clarke focused on the sliver of white teeth visible behind the Commander's slightly parted lips. The thought of feeling them scrape over her skin and sink into her, Lexa's warm breath fanning over neck, caused a flash of heat to well up in her stomach.

It was another draw-back of having her Omega roam wild and free so suddenly - everything that hadn't made sense to her previously now did. She'd never understood why Omegas, the few she knew in any case, wore their mate's marks all over them. Clothes, bites, hickeys, it had all seemed like the most horrible kind of possessiveness, of suppression.

Being claimed as property had never appealed to her and that was what she'd liked so much about Finn. He hadn't had that baggage. He hadn't tried to act more like an Alpha would, he hadn't tried to claim her, he'd accepted it when she'd told him she wanted no hickeys or teeth marks.

But now her body craved it, basked in the thought of wearing a claim for all to see, even if it didn't involve mating. That an Alpha would do so was enough to make her dizzy, her mouth wet and wanting.

She didn't know what kind of answer Lexa was hoping for, but Clarke closed her eyes and vowed to push her thoughts as far into the back of her mind as she could.

"Let's do it," she murmured and tipped her head back before she could change her mind, offering the naked arch of her throat. She heard Lexa's breath hitch, a snarl scrabbling to make it out of her chest, but nothing happened for a few long moments.

Just when she contemplated asking whether something was wrong, a slim hand closed around the back of her neck and a burst of warm air against her throat signaled Lexa's proximity.

Clarke closed her eyes.

The first brush of teeth across her pulse point drew a shudder from her and she forced herself to keep still, to not make more of this than it was.

"Are you ready?" Lexa asked, lips just barely grazing the paper-thin skin stretching over her pumping blood. Clarke didn't want to move her head lest it rob her of the sensation of the Alpha's fingers burying into the blonde curls at the nape of her neck and merely 'mhm'-ed in confirmation.

Lexa held her breath as if to gather her wits before opening her mouth and setting her teeth against Clarke's throat. She didn't bite down, didn't exert any of the force Clarke knew she was capable of.

Involuntarily, Clarke shifted, pressing closer to the dangerous teeth. The Commander's grip tightened in response and a growl built in her chest - just moments before she flicked her tongue against the flesh in her mouth and bit down.

It hurt. For a moment, that's all it was. Pain, sharp and searing, as her skin broke beneath the onslaught and sharp-edged teeth sunk into her.

Clarke gasped and wanted to flinch away, but Lexa snarled waringly and kept her in place with a firm hand. She whimpered.

It wasn't a brutal bite, barely deep enough to draw blood, but Clarke felt it all the way down to her stomach, felt the hurt twist into a strange kind of pleasure that made her want to crawl closer and ask
Lexa to do it harder - to mark her completely and for all to see. The heat of her broken flesh pounded in time with her pulse and the deepest, most base part of her wished Lexa would leave a scar.

Another part of her - and it was a part that felt frightfully like it was just her - wondered how Lexa would react if she straddled her right then and there, if she were to sink down and ride her with Lexa's teeth still lodged in her throat, a hand gripping the back of her neck and hips straining to meet hers.

It would be so easy. One leg thrown over the Alpha's, one pop of a button - two if she was coherent enough not to just rip what wouldn't open quickly enough - and the Commander wouldn't even protest, not with her rut turning her breathing harsh and ragged and her tongue flickering out every once in a while as if she wanted to taste Clarke's skin but didn't allow herself to.

Lexa's jaw twitched, momentarily sending a fresh wave of pain down Clarke's spine, and Clarke couldn't quite keep the moan brewing in the back of her throat from escaping.

It was instinct that made her enjoy this, plain and simple, but she was aware that the cause didn't change the result. Knowing it didn't make her heart beat any slower or her legs any steadier and it didn't make her any less wet.

It didn't stop her from reaching up and gripping the back of the Alpha's head when it seemed like she was preparing to pull away, keeping her in place.

Lexa groaned quietly.

Clarke's back pushed against the fallen tree behind her, her spine curving around it underneath the weight of the warm body pressing down on hers and she couldn't tell how they'd gotten into this position, just that they had, and that she was encouraging the other woman to move closer, more fully on top of her, with every demanding pull at her brown mane.

Before she could stop herself, her other hand was sliding down the coarse fabric of Lexa's clothes, down her torso and onto her hip. She knew she should have kept it there, kept some semblance of professionalism, but the scent of Alpha surrounding her made it so very hard to remember.

She kept going, around her hip to her stomach and down past the waistband of the Commander's pants until she felt the warm weight of her erection against her palm.

Lexa flinched and gasped at the unexpected touch, her hold of the skin between her teeth trembling as Clarke cupped her through her pants.

A gentle squeeze was all it took to break the Alpha out of her trance. She let go of Clarke's throat and cursed quietly, squeezing her eyes shut as if willing her body to calm down.

Clarke breathed out shakily, far more disappointed than she wanted to let on.

The pain of the bite gradually lessened and disappeared, leaving behind nothing but a warm pulsing where Lexa had marked her and allowing some clarity to return to Clarke's over-stimulated mind.

The Alpha hadn't moved away yet, the hard length straining against the front of her pants and twitching beneath Clarke's hand.

It had been a bad idea to do this now. They were both still worked up from what had happened after Quint, both reeling from their near-death experience, Lexa especially so, and being marked - Lexa marking her - was like throwing fuel into the fire.
With more difficulty than was justified, Clarke removed her hand from the Alpha's pants and settled it against her shoulder instead. Lexa had stiffened at the movement, her spine as rigid as the log they were leaning against.

"Lexa," Clarke murmured, attempting to dispel the huskiness in her voice. "Let go."

The Commander expelled a harsh breath, though her grip didn't lighten.

Clarke began to rub the tense muscles in her shoulders carefully, hoping to coax her into relaxing.

"Let go," she repeated. "We have to get back to TonDC."

It worked. Slowly but surely, the stony frame above hers loosened up and Lexa released her from her grip, moving back until she was sitting on her haunches.

"Are you alright?" Clarke asked, aware that Lexa's gaze was focused on her throat and resisting the urge to touch a hand to the wound herself. "I'm sorry about- about the touching."

The Commander shook her head. When her eyes refocused after a long moment, she was calm - at least on the surface. "What about you? Does it hurt?"

Clarke quickly took stock. The injury smarted, naturally, but it was strangely satisfying in a way she couldn't afford to analyse - or admit - right now.

"Not too badly."

"You should see Nyko once we are back nonetheless to make sure it will not get infected."

Clarke nodded and an awkward silence stretched between them. She knew they were both ignoring the obvious issue here and she could only hope that Lexa was right when she'd said that she would get her hormones under control if she could just get back to training.

"Let's go," Lexa said eventually when neither of them could think of anything more to add, clearing her throat and moving away.

As they packed up silently, Clarke couldn't help but touch her fingers to the teeth marks in her skin.

They parted as the first huts of TonDC came into view. Lexa nodded her goodbye and hurried onwards to where Clarke had seen her train this morning, her steps fast and clunky and bursting with energy.

Clarke carefully kept herself from looking after her and steered into the opposite direction towards Nyko's hut.

She didn't plan on staying long enough to answer any questions he might have about their whereabouts, but he didn't even ask. He took care of her wound quickly and efficiently, giving her a knowing look from underneath raised eyebrows and Clarke fled as soon as he was done.

She didn't stop by her hut, didn't even stop when she almost ran into Murphy, didn't stop until she was well on her way towards the lake, just deep enough in the forest that she knew nobody would see or smell her.

Back slamming against a sturdy tree, Clarke didn't even bother undoing her pants before her hand slipped past the waistband and into her sopping wet underwear.
She almost groaned in relief when her fingers made contact with hot, aching flesh and the tension in her belly flared up, her arousal returning like it had never been gone at all.

The last weeks had been too much for her, too much for her body, from the very first time Lexa had rejected her to the constant thrum of arousal underneath her skin to all the moments between them that had almost escalated and Clarke needed relief.

Her pants were too tight to allow much room for movement, but it didn't matter. She already knew that she wouldn't need much, every brush of a finger against her clit sending sparks of electricity up her spine and pushing her closer to orgasm.

Clarke's other hand scrabbled to grab hold of the tree at her back, the slight sting from her scraped palms not even registering as she furrowed her brows an bit her lip to keep quiet.

She'd never been one for masturbation, had never felt the need to. With the suppressants making short work of her sex drive, touching herself had been a rare flight of fancy more than anything else and she wasn't used to this, to feeling like she'd burst if she didn't get herself off.

Her fingers speeded up, her thighs tensing and her hips jerking, hoping to get more, to get that last bit of sensation that would push her over the edge.

Clarke hissed in frustration when her arousal built and built, her climax eluding her.

"Come on," she pressed through gritted teeth, tears of irritation gathering in the corners of her eyes. She was close, her toes curling inside her boots, and she clapped a hand over her own mouth to muffle the noise.

She tried to think of Finn, tried to picture his face, his body, even the one time they'd slept together, but the images were hazy and hard to hold on to, swirling away like smoke. It left her achingly cold and no closer to orgasm than before.

Clarke wanted to scream.

In a last ditch effort, she turned her head and buried her nose into the collar of her coat, breathing in deeply. It smelled like Lexa, all of her smelled like Lexa, and Clarke couldn't have stopped the flood of images if she'd wanted to.

The twitch of Lexa's jaw when she had to hold herself back, the sliver of white teeth behind plump lips, strong shoulders, wide green eyes - Clarke gasped, hips jumping.

It wasn't the Alpha she was thinking of. It wasn't being claimed and dominated that drove her now, not so far out of reach of any Alpha pheromones. It was just Lexa.

It was the memory of her lean body pressed against hers, the way she trembled whenever Clarke pushed her too far towards losing control, how there was always a sense of barely contained energy about her, like she would burn everything around her if she allowed herself to let go.

How she said Clarke's name. How it rolled off her tongue in a sharp murmur, just a bit too careful and too contained.

Clarke wondered what it would be like to have those full lips whisper her name when Lexa wasn't holding back, when she was knot-deep in her, too far gone to know what she was saying and too close to climax to care, when her strained muscles quivered and her hips jerked unsteadily.

Without thinking, Clarke reached up to lay the tips of her fingers against the mark the Commander
had made and pressed down, imagining it was Lexa's teeth in her throat and her hand circling Clarke's clit.

The whole thing was over embarrassingly fast. Clarke bit down on the fabric of her collar and came with a muffled, drawn-out groan of Lexa's name, the muscles in her belly tensing deliciously and her relief turning her knees into jello.

She floated for long moments, hips straining and focused exclusively on the sensations flooding her from head to toe and the images still playing before her inner eye.

When the waves of pleasure finally receded, she sank down onto the ground with a sigh, barely managing to pull her hand out of her pants before her head fell back against the tree trunk with a thump. She closed her eyes.

Clarke had always known that this arrangement she had with Lexa wouldn't be easy. She'd always known that she would get herself into situations she had no control over.

What she hadn't anticipated was that she'd find herself attracted to Lexa - to the person, not the Alpha - or that she would end up by herself in the forest, masturbating like she was in the middle of her heat.

She groaned quietly at the twitch in her lower stomach as she remembered Lexa telling her that she'd done the same, and more than once.

With pictures flooding her mind anew and her body deciding that one orgasm was not at all enough to keep it satisfied, Clarke suddenly wondered whether insisting on friendship might have been a very very bad idea.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

In which there is a first and Clarke wants to strangle Murphy (again).

“I shall accompany you.”

Clarke blinked, looking up from where she’d been packing her small bag. “What?”

There was the short clang of metal on metal as Lexa tightened the straps of her armour, picking up her new sword and inspecting it with a critical eye. There had been no time to replace the weapon she’d lost to the gorilla with another one specifically tailored to her hands, so she’d have to do with a second-hand edition of a simple blade. The Commander’s furrowed brow told of her dissatisfaction regarding the situation.

“To your encampment,” Lexa clarified, sheathing the sword. She hesitated, peering up at Clarke when no answer was forthcoming. “Unless you do not wish me to?”

Her unsure expression threw Clarke. These last few days hadn’t been easy, especially not now that Clarke had started sneaking off at all hours of the day just to get herself off, but Lexa had been trying. She didn’t always succeed, her habit of putting on a front being a hard one to break, but she’d been doing her best to be a friend.

She’d been kind and respectful, at least in private. In public, they’d been keeping to their strategy of presenting as a happily mated couple – standing just a little closer than before, seeking out each other’s presence, making sure they were seen whispering to each other as a couple might do.

Clarke thought she felt a burning mark on her lower back where Lexa had rested her hand as she’d guided her towards their hut.

Some of the Grounders still seemed unsure, but Quint’s fate was an open secret and they didn’t dare act up. Not yet, in any case.

“That’s not it,” Clarke hastened to reassure her. If it weren’t for her own predicament, if it weren’t for Lexa’s rut making it even harder to get a grip on her physical reactions, she’d enjoy her company. “But aren’t you needed here?”

The Alpha shook her head. “They don’t need me to govern them and most of my warriors will remain here. TonDC is not in danger.”

It wasn’t completely true and they both knew it. An attack was not out of the question and if the Mountain Men came, the people of TonDC would need a leader. Without Indra, they’d need Lexa. Gustus or Nyko might be able to fill the roll if it came to it, but they weren’t the leading type and they’d need to be prepared.

“What about your rut?” Clarke returned to packing her bag, keeping her back to Lexa so she wouldn’t see her eyes close and the corners of her mouth lowering into a grimace. She already knew that the sparring helped immensely, even though it led to some nasty bruising – she just wasn’t sure it was helping her. Lexa returned every night smelling strongly of pheromones and sweat, despite her
daily baths, and with Clarke’s new-found \textit{habit}, she was starting to get sore.

And as if that wasn’t embarrassing enough, Murphy of all people had caught on. He’d seen her coming back from the forest, taken one whiff of her scent and hadn’t stopped laughing since. The smarmy bastard.

“Going with you will not stop me from continuing my training regime.”

“Will it keep working?”

Lexa had been holding up fine these last few days, apart from the occasional bout of anger or possessiveness, but they couldn’t know when her rut would end or how strong her urges might become. The longer she went without mating, the longer her rutting period could potentially become.

And Clarke was absolutely sure that she wouldn’t be able to take a whole month of it. Neither could Lexa, she thought with a quick glance at the dark bruises littering the Commander’s jaw and cheekbones, the perpetual restlessness hanging about her like a heavy veil making her shoulders strain and her legs jiggle.

“It has to,” Lexa stated resolutely. “And I would rather not risk sending you alone. The Mountain Men have already attacked once and they will do so again.”

A second of hesitation passed.

“Send a few of your men with me.”

Even as she said the words, Clarke knew how Lexa would take it. The Commander raised her chin at the subtle rejection, eyes taking on that distant quality Clarke had come to recognize, and finally inclined her head in the barest of nods.

“I will. Have a pleasant journey, then.”

Clarke knew she should leave it at that, accept the sentiment and continue packing, but she’d learned over the course of their marriage that Lexa wasn’t one for words, at least not when it was about her personally. She could teach Clarke about the finer points of leadership for hours or ask a hundred questions about space, but any expression of what was going on in her head was kept firmly sealed behind her lips. Clarke was only recently starting to learn how to look for the underlying meaning in Lexa’s actions.

This one was, for once, clear as day.

\textit{Stay safe.}

Despite herself, Clarke spoke up again. “You could come after me, when- when you’re sure that one of your warriors could defend the village in case of an attack. It might be a good idea for you to take a look at the Ark, meet the people.”

Preferably after Clarke had managed to get a grip on herself.

The Alpha stared at her with a calculating eye as if to gauge whether the offer was made out of pity or politeness.

“I mean it,” Clarke insisted, catching Lexa’s gaze. “I’d like you to.”

Lexa hesitated, then nodded haltingly. “Very well. I will see you off, then.”
Their group was bigger than Clarke would have thought. Lexa had insisted on sending a dozen men with her – all of them trusted and carefully selected Betas.

The Commander herself watched over the preparations, a guard of about Gustus’ height hovering behind her.

"I take it Gustus cannot yet take up his usual duties?" Clarke asked with a suspicious glance at the man. She remembered seeing him around the village - more importantly, she remembered him standing besides Quint as he was blocking her entrance into the hut, standing between her and a hurt Lexa. He returned her gaze with one of his own, cool and calculating, and Clarke had to stop herself from taking a step back. The guard sneered.

Lexa gave a short nod, adjusting the placement of the saddle on the mare the villagers had fetched for Clarke. It was the same horse they’d used on their journey to TonDC and Clarke felt inexplicably calmer to not have to get used to a new animal, especially one that might not be as mild-mannered. "Yes. He isn’t happy about it, but he’s of no use to me in his current condition and he knows it. He will be better off looking after things here, once I have made the proper preparations. It shouldn’t take more than a day."

Aware of the guard’s judging eyes resting on her, Clarke sidled closer, slipping between Lexa and the horse. The Alpha only hesitated for a moment, barely long enough to be noticable at all, before she seamlessly rested a hand on Clarke’s hip and shifted to shield her from prying eyes.

Clarke didn’t know whether the latter action was a conscious decision, but she was grateful all the same.

“What is it?” Lexa murmured, inclining her head to keep the whispered words between them. For a short moment, Clarke was thrown as her gaze focused on the Alpha’s lips.

“Your guard,” she finally whispered, tearing her eyes away. “He was one of Quint’s supporters.”

The Commander’s grip on her tightened, though her expression didn’t change. “I know. Ryder’s been studying us for some time.”

“Then why him?”

Clarke wondered idly at the strong thrumming of Lexa’s pulse point, unconsciously leaning closer towards the protective presence of her ‘mate’. It was difficult to concentrate on the matter at hand when Lexa’s scent – so much stronger than usual – clogged her throat.

Lexa didn’t answer for a long moment, half-closed green eyes resting on the healing bite mark adorning Clarke’s throat. Instinctively, Clarke lifted her chin.

“It’s not our allies we have to convince,” the Alpha said absentmindedly. Her thumb had started rubbing across the expanse of Clarke’s hip in a casual motion that made Clarke want to run or fall to her knees or do a hundred other things she shouldn’t be thinking about, not now and maybe not ever. “But those who would doubt our union.”

Clarke ‘mhm’-ed, her hand finding its way onto Lexa’s forearm. It wasn’t a conscious motion, but she supposed it was preferable to once again running and hiding away in the forest until she’d taken care of herself.

Her bite mark was already starting to disappear, but it pulsed in time with her heartbeat and Clarke had found herself having to hold back from asking Lexa to do it again on numerous occasions. Clarke knew she was being influenced, that the Commander’s rut and her own new-found realization
regarding her attraction to Lexa herself was messing with her hormones and her thoughts, but still she couldn’t shake the desire to have the Alpha claim her. As completely as either of them dared.

Lexa growled quietly, her throat moving as she swallowed, and Clarke held her breath at once. She had to remind herself that any reaction from her could trigger Lexa’s instincts and end up destroying the hold the Commander had on her urges.

And she didn’t want that, Clarke thought to herself. She didn’t. It wouldn’t be fair to either of them to take advantage of the Alpha’s weakened state, regardless of how soft her lips looked or how her eyes burned with possibilities everytime they caught Clarke’s.

It had all been so much easier to ignore back when Clarke hadn’t been aware of how the muscles in Lexa’s jaw bunched when she was tense, how her fingers would twitch when Clarke moved away, how she’d hold back all but the smallest of growls when she caught a whiff of her scent.

All subtle, barely noticeable signs that Clarke hadn’t paid much attention to until a few days ago and couldn’t ignore now that she knew. All signs that pointed to the possibility that Lexa wanted her, too.

Whether as an Alpha who wanted an Omega or Lexa who wanted her, Clarke didn’t know and she was rapidly approaching a point at which she did not care. She didn’t need Lexa to like her. Not for this.

It was a dangerous path to tread for a lot of reasons, least of all because Lexa’s rut had both of their minds muddled and barely coherent.

“Are you alright?”

Clarke blinked at the question before nodding unsteadily. It was a flimsy confirmation at best and the Commander’s furrowed brow told her so. She averted her gaze for a moment, only to catch the guard watching them with narrowed eyes. She quickly focused back on the Alpha.

“He’s watching us,” she muttered. “Closely.”

Lexa nodded. “It’s to be expected. For an Alpha to let their Omega out of their during a rut of course seems…unusual. Not altogether impossible and most will understand that we have other things to consider, but those who are already suspicious will only see what they want to.”

Clarke bit her tongue to stop herself from proposing the obvious solution. She had no reason to believe that Lexa would welcome her advances beyond the demands of her rut, she reminded herself even as Lexa’s hand slid around to rest on the small of her back.

“I’ll be careful on my way,” she said quietly, feeling the Alpha’s stiff form relax marginally. “Your warriors will keep me perfectly safe.”

Lexa’s nostrils flared, her pupils expanding dangerously. “So can I.”

Clarke took a sharp breath, heart speeding up to beat against her ribcage as the heavy scent of the Alpha’s instincts filled the air. That had been the wrong thing to say.

Her rut made Lexa easier to read, but also far more unpredictable.

The Commander inclined her head, nose barely grazing along the tendons on the side of Clarke’s neck as a quiet snarl built in her chest. “I’m stronger than them. I can protect you.”

“I-,” Clarke started to say, but the rest of the sentence got caught in her throat, warmth crawling up
her stomach. *It's her rut*, she told herself. *Just her rut.*

Shaky fingers grasped onto either side of Lexa’s jaw and tugged her face upwards as Clarke caught the Alpha’s darkened gaze.

“I know,” she rasped. “I know you can. No one’s challenging you. It’s okay.”

The Commander didn’t react to her words, her eyes jumping hastily from Clarke’s eyes to the mark on her neck and back.

Taking a deep breath, Clarke turned her head to the side to display her throat and hunched over, making herself appear smaller.

She couldn’t see Lexa’s expression, but she heard her sharp exhale and felt the puff of her warm breath as the Alpha once again brought her mouth to the indents her teeth had left.

Clarke should stop her, should be the one to keep control of the situation, she knew, but the thrill of excitement that ran through her at the thought of being bitten again stopped her in her tracks.

She didn’t move as soft lips brushed over the healing wound and her too-hot skin down to the edge of her collar, and she didn’t dare look up, knowing she’d find the warriors around them watching with rapt attention.

It was much easier to pretend it was just them, that she was doing this to help ease Lexa’s instincts, instead of admitting that it quite simply felt good. That it was as much selfishness as it was self-preservation that caused her to stand perfectly still and allow Lexa’s scent to wrap around her. That she was using ‘friendship’ as a front to indulge her body’s needs, as unfair as it was.

The obnoxious clearing of someone’s throat next to them made them both flinch, the smooth teeth disappearing from Clarke’s neck amidst a strained whimper. Clarke felt a distinct desire to strangle whomever had interrupted them.

The twitching of her fingers did not diminish in the least when she turned her head to find Murphy tapping his foot impatiently and staring at her with a raised eyebrow.

“A minute, your Highness?” he mocked her in a nasal tone, smirking at the angry tick in her cheek. The effect was somewhat lost when his eyes twitched towards Lexa and his hand went up to delicately cover his nose.

Clarke fought the urge to step in-between. The last thing she needed was another Omega – **Murphy** - to get worked up by the scent of the Alpha’s rut. The last thing she needed was a reminder that it could have been any Omega in her place.

The Commander’s guard sneered at his insolence and took a threatening step forward, no doubt ready to put the Omega in his place. Lexa held up a shaky hand and cleared her throat.

“I shall leave you to it,” she said hoarsely, retracting her hands from Clarke’s body and turning away stiffly. The Commander all but fled from the scene with a last, wary look at Murphy, though it didn’t escape Clarke that she didn’t stray too far, just far enough to not be eavesdropping.

Clarke’s brows lowered into a frown at Lexa’s clunky movements and her desire to strangle Murphy intensified.

She grabbed his arm and unceremoniously dragged him further away from the group, not quite able to bring herself to care about his mumbled protests.
“What do you want, Murphy?” she sighed, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

He scoffed and rubbed his arm where her fingers had dug into his skin. “Lay off me, Clarke.” Murphy jerked his head towards Lexa, who, as Clarke acknowledged with narrowed eyes, still kept her face – and nose – turned away from them both. “It’s not my fault you can’t get her to fuck you.”

Clarke pulled up her shoulders in anger and embarrassment, lips thinning into an angry line. “You’re one to talk. How’s Gustus doing, by the way?”

Murphy’s face went blank, hand clenching at his sides, and Clarke drove the proverbial knife deeper. “I’m sure he’s just thrilled to have you trail after him like a lost puppy.”

The assumption had been a wild guess, meant to humiliate rather than speak true, but Murphy stiffened and hunched his back aggressively, his cheeks turning red and blotchy. “That is none of your fucking business,” he snarled. “At least I don’t go around jerking off in the woods because no one else will have me. Do you really think you’re gonna fool anyone like this? Sure, a mated couple that can’t even stand to kiss each-”

Clarke’s face burned as she clasped a hand over Murphy’s mouth and hissed. “Shut up.” She knew what he said wasn’t true. She was an Omega. If she wanted to, she could get herself any Alpha she wanted with nothing but the twitch of a finger.

Nearly any Alpha.

Murphy’s sharp glare above her palm didn’t lessen, but he made no attempt to speak again and she removed her hand, least of all because she wouldn’t put it past him to act like a child and lick it.

She took a deep, calming breath and forced her shoulders to relax. Murphy was the least of her problems, if an incredibly annoying one. “Just tell me what you wanted.”

He averted his eyes, the corners of his mouth slipping. The redness in his face did not retreat. “I’m staying here,” he muttered gruffly, shuffling his feet. “It’s not like there’s anything waiting for me in Camp Jaha and we both know you want my company about as much as I want yours. And-“ He broke off, clenching his teeth defiantly. “I guess I still gotta make something right here.”

Clarke didn’t like Murphy. Some days, she downright hated him. But for all that she blamed him for much of what had gone wrong during their time on the ground, she understood him.

He wasn’t welcome in Camp Jaha and maybe never would be again, but he was tolerated here. Gustus had stood up for him. Murphy had a chance and Clarke didn’t feel vicious enough to force him away from that. In any case, she certainly saw the benefit of not having to drag him along.

“Fine,” she acquiesced. “But that means you’re on your own. With Octavia and me gone, you’ll be the only Omega here.”

He spat onto the ground. “I can take care of myself.”

Clarke shook her head. Murphy wasn’t her responsibility, had stopped being her responsibility when he’d killed one of their own, and this was his decision. “Fine.”

He groaned obnoxiously as she made to leave. “Wait.”

Clarke merely turned her head to look over her shoulder.
Murphy sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I wasn’t trying to be an asshole. My shit is none of your business and yours is none of mine. So whatever your deal is with the Commander, that’s your thing.”

Clarke nodded hesitantly. As far as apologies went, it was one of Murphy’s better ones. It wouldn’t change anything and she knew they’d be back to wanting to strangle each other next time they met, but she was too exhausted, too confused and worked-up by everything that was going on to decline the sentiment.

“Gustus is a good man,” she said eventually. “Try not to mess it up.”

Murphy opened his mouth as if to protest before closing it with a quiet click. His final response was a simple nod and Clarke watched him go, the back of his neck still drenched in red. It did not escape her that he made a beeline for Gustus’ hut.

When she returned to Lexa’s side, the Alpha was talking to one of the villagers – a dark-skinned girl of about Clarke’s age, dressed in simple clothes and with dirt under her fingernails. A Beta, Clarke’s sense of smell told her. Pretty. And obviously as awed of Lexa as most of the villagers were, if the nervous shuffling of her feet and the redness in her cheeks was any indication.

She tamped down the immediate sense of apprehension that welled up in her stomach at the sight. Ryder was watching the spectacle with eagle eyes, no doubt waiting for an indication – any indication – that the Commander’s interests were not as singular as they should be.

“Clarke,” Lexa greeted her and took a step back to include her in the conversation. “This is Maria. She’s responsible for most of the village’s crop growing.”

The girl smiled hesitantly and offered a respectful nod. “It’s good to meet you, Komheda.”

Her English was good, but far more accented than that of Lexa and her warriors and Clarke guessed she hadn’t been learning as long as the others.

She glanced at the Commander curiously, silently asking for an explanation. She hadn’t been introduced to any of the other villagers.

“Maria has suggested joining us in your camp. She believes she can help your people prepare for the winter.”

Maria nodded. “If you’ll allow me to, I can teach you which crops to plant and how to keep them alive. Not all crops can survive everywhere, especially this late in the year.”

Clarke contemplated the offer with a tilt of her head. Some of the farmers had survived the journey to Earth, but they didn’t know the lay of the land or the plants that grew on the ground. There was no guarantee that the seeds they had brought with them would grow in this climate or be able to withstand the radiation.

“It’s a good idea,” she agreed. “Once you’re there, I’ll take you to our engineers. They might be able to build a greenhouse to grow the crops.”

The Beta hmm-ed in confirmation before dedicating a last, respectful bow to the Commander and scampering off.

“She’ll join me tomorrow,” Lexa explained, walking Clarke to the now fully prepped and saddled horse. Ryder casually followed them. “She’s not a fighter, but she’ll be safe with me and my guards.”
Clarke wasn’t sure she liked the thought.

She couldn’t help but remember Lexa’s hurried breaths in her ear as she’d pressed her against the tree, her groaned confession of having to take care of herself whenever the pheromones got to be too much.

Lexa had told her time and time again that she was free to have sex with whomever she wished and Clarke suddenly wondered whether she would take the same rights for herself, whether she would look for someone to satisfy her urges once she got tired of her own hands or couldn’t deal with her rut anymore.

Whether she would be able to resist for long if someone (anyone who was safe and uncomplicated and more to her liking, anyone who wasn’t Clarke) offered her relief.

“Clarke? Are you listening?”

“What?”

Lexa’s brow crinkled as she regarded her worriedly and Clarke shook off her thoughts. It wasn’t her place. Whatever physical attraction Lexa had displayed that day in the woods and whatever physical attraction Clarke herself felt, it didn’t give her the right to decide whose company the Commander sought.

And neither did it give her the right to act on the possessiviness that came with having an attractive Alpha around.

She didn’t want to compare this to the situation with Finn and Raven, but a nagging tickle in the back of her mind kept her on that particular train of thought nonetheless.

It wouldn’t be cheating. It wouldn’t be anything like the betrayal she’d felt when Finn had stared at her with sad eyes and told her he was sorry, but that didn’t mean she had to like it.

“I asked what the boy wanted,” Lexa said, cocking her head.

Clarke cleared her throat. “He’s going to stay here while I’m gone. Is that okay?”

“Of course.”

She hesitated for a moment, contemplating whether Murphy was worth it and, coming to the definite conclusion that he probably wasn’t, forged ahead anyway. “Could you see about getting him a guard? Just someone who’s willing to keep an eye on him while we’re gone. A lone Omega is an easy target.”

Lexa nodded and gestured for one of her warriors to come closer, exchanging a few hurried words of Trigedasleng with him before he sauntered off.

“It’s done,” she said. “The boy will not be harmed.”

“Good,” Clarke breathed out, stopping awkwardly when she realized that there was nothing more to say. They’d covered everything that needed to be discussed and all that was left now was to say goodbye.

It was strange, to think they’d be separated after spending these last few weeks in such close proximity. To think she’d wake up without being surrounded by Alpha scent, even if it was just one day.
It felt almost like dependancy.

That more than anything was what made Clarke nod curtly and finally grab the horse’s reins. All around them, the Grounders took the cue and went into formation, keeping her in the safest spot in the middle.

“I’ll be going, then,” she said, not quite sure what sort of goodbye would be appropriate. She knew what a mated couple in love would do, but their situation was hardly ordinary or fit for the description.

Lexa nodded awkwardly, pulling her shoulders back in discomfort. She made no move to initiate physical contact and over her shoulder, Clarke saw Ryder’s expression transform into a knowing smirk.

_Do you really think you’re gonna fool anyone like this_?

Later, much later, Clarke would wonder whether it would have changed anything if she hadn’t followed that split-second urge.

Her hands purposely reached for Lexa’s face, to hold her still as Clarke glanced around at the people watching them. She had to make sure they’d be seen.

She saw Lexa’s eyes widen, saw the cautious confusion in them, and then she closed her eyes, rocked up, and pressed their lips together.

Her mouth was soft, softer than Clarke would have imagined, and she couldn’t hold back a quick inhal of breath, even as she was all to aware of one thing.

Lexa stood frozen under her hands.

Her mouth had turned to marble beneath Clarke’s and her slim frame had stretched taut - like a wire about to snap. Clarke realized that she’d made a mistake when the Alpha’s shoulders began to shake, her kiss remaining cold and unreciprocated.

Just as she was about to awkwardly pull back and hope they could forget all about her miscalculation - false assumption, stupid, _stupid_ mistake – something in the Commander’s stance changed. The straight set of her spine softened, the muscles in her shoulders loosened - the tension keeping her stiff and unresponsive melted away.

Lexa tilted her head, molding their lips together, and it shouldn't have made as big of a difference as it did, the simple press of her mouth shouldn't have thrown Clarke off track, but it did.

Stars burst behind Clarke's eyelids.

Their lips slotted together seamlessly, easily, and it was warm and soft and so unlike kissing Finn. His lips had been dry and pleasant and back then she'd thought nothing could beat the warmth spreading in her chest as they'd kissed in the bunker. That sense of ease Finn brought with him had been something a part of Clarke desperately craved - the part of her that got tired of the responsibilities, the expectations, of being an _Omega_.

Lexa's kiss didn't feel like simplicity. It didn't feel like release and distraction.

It felt like fire, propelling her heart into a mad pounding against her ribcage. It felt like security and protection, like strength, and their mixed scent tickling the back of her throat made the Omega in her purr.
It felt like *Alpha*.

It couldn't make her forget what she was or what people saw when they looked at her, but for the moment she couldn't quite remember why it was important in the first place.

Why being an Omega and kissing an Alpha - why being *Clarke* and kissing *Lexa* - would matter beyond the tingling in her belly and the dizzying play of muscle benath her hands.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew it was her body and brain reacting to the one kissing her being an Alpha, that being actually attracted to her amplified those feelings, but the thought was too far away to grasp.

Clarke had intended for this to be short and efficient – a goodbye kiss the likes of which she’d seen other couples exchange a thousand times. It wasn’t supposed to go on as it did.

Lexa kissed like she spoke. Clear, careful and nuanced - gentle, yet with an underlying sense of power lurking in the trembling curve of her mouth.

Involuntarily, Clarke pushed closer, wanting to feel more, wanting a deeper connection than the one between their lips.

Lexa groaned quietly and leaned in more insistently when Clarke pushed their hips flush together, her fingers burying into the soft flesh of Clarke's hips.

Clarke resisted the urge to shimmy against the bulge pressing against her pelvis.

She was all too aware of the growl vibrating through the Alpha's chest, of the long, slim fingers sliding down to rest on her ass, and when Lexa's tongue swiped over her lower lip, she granted her entrance without hesitation.

Clarke automatically allowed her spine to curve and her head to bend back, too focused on the sensation of Lexa exploring her mouth to bother standing her ground. She might have fallen had the Commander not held her in a secure grip.

Her senses were muddled, clouded by Lexa's smell, her unique taste that Clarke couldn't categorize as anything but *Lexa*, and her own hands glided into the Commander's thick mane of hair, gripping it both to keep herself still and to pull Lexa further into her.

A particularly hard tug earned her a gasp and a twitch of Lexa's hips. She did it again, if only to prove her theory, and it caused Lexa to snarl deep in her throat, as much of a warning as it was evidence of her arousal.

The Alpha's grip tightened, nails digging into Clarke's ass as she pulled her tighter against her, purposely grinding the bulge of her cock against her for the shortest of moments.

Making a frustrated noise in the back of her throat, Clarke tugged at the strands between her fingers until Lexa gasped at the pain and used her momentary distraction to push back against her tongue and flick her own across the roof of the Commander's mouth, to map out the shape and texture of the hot, wet flesh.

She couldn't begin to guess how long their kiss went on, couldn't form a thought beyond scent and tongue and *Lexa*, couldn't help but wish the warm palms on her ass would grasp her again, would do what the unconscious twitching of Lexa's fingers promised.

Just as one of Lexa’s palm threatened to slide beneath Clarke’s pants, an awkward cough behind
them pulled them out of their stupor. Lexa breathed in sharply, their lips separating quickly enough to make Clarke blink and wonder at the sudden absence of a warm mouth on hers.

"Heda, we should get going if we wish to make it there before nightfall."

The warrior pointedly looked at a spot over Lexa's shoulder, hands clasped uncomfortably behind her back. The rest of them behaved much the same way, not quite able to pretend they hadn't watched an entirely too private display.

Clarke cleared her throat and stepped back, willing the redness crawling up her neck to disappear and the smell of the wetness between her legs to dissipate.

She caught sight of Ryder shifting uncomfortably, along with the few Alphas in their vicinity, and she averted her eyes. She figured they wouldn't doubt them again, at least not for some time, and it should have made her feel relieved rather than agitated.

It didn't.

Lexa cleared her throat, arms held stiffly at her sides, and her excitement was still painfully obvious in the awkard set of her hips. "Very well, you should go. I will follow you tomorrow as planned."

The husky tone of her voice sent shivers up Clarke's spine.

She had no doubt that Lexa's next sparring session would end in quite a beat-down for anyone in her way.

Clarke's attempt to swing into the saddle was as pathetic as the first time she'd tried, her legs too shaky to give her much in the way of momentum and her palms too sweaty to get a proper grip on the fine leather.

Just like before, Lexa took her by the waist and gave her a much-needed push, steadying her until she was safe and secure on top of the big animal. The Alpha's hands lingered a moment before she caught herself and moved away, her throat bobbing as she swallowed.

"Goodbye, Clarke."

Their eyes met for a brief moment and Clarke nodded, taking a deep breath. She contemplated saying something - anything - to release the heavy tension settling around them, but the moment to speak was gone before she could.

As the horse beneath her set into motion and led her past the gate of TonDC towards Camp Jaha, Clarke touched the tips of her fingers to her lower lip in a motion that wasn't as unconscious as she would have liked it to be.

It had been necessary, she reminded herself, even if a part of her felt guilty for enjoying it. She'd known it would be difficult, they both had, and it was natural for her body to react so strongly to an Alpha, especially one she was attracted to. It was.

Lexa's eyes, dark and hungry, followed her until she was out of sight.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

In which Clarke and Lexa are back together quite a bit sooner than expected and they both get to learn something from each other.

Chapter Notes

So, we all know that S3 has started - which is why I must ask you to please not mention anything about it in the comments. I'm not watching the season (for multiple reasons) and it's very important to me to not have to deal with it right now.

This also means that I will not be using anything from S3 in this fanfic, in case anyone was wondering. (Except for speculations and such that happened way before S3 began.)

Thanks!

They wouldn't make it back before nightfall as Clarke had hoped.

The incident (kiss, the kiss) had delayed their departure, but what had truly kept them from traveling with any amount of speed was, as Clarke had to admit, her own shortcomings when it came to riding.

She'd ridden with Lexa once and had taken some pointers on the topic from her during their time in TonDC, but when it came down to it, she could barely keep the horse on the road and herself in the saddle, much less urge it into anything faster than a crawl.

None of the warriors around her had said anything - whether out of politeness or out of fear what the Commander would do to them should she find out they had laughed at her mate - but Clarke was very much aware of the sidelong glances.

None of them dared suggest that she walk and Clarke would rather not seem anymore incompetent than she already did, and so they all crept along at a snail's pace.

It left Clarke with ample time to think.

She didn't know what would await her back at Camp Jaha. She'd only been gone for close to over two weeks, a laughable amount of time in the grand scheme of things, but she couldn't help but feel like something had fundamentally changed.

When she'd left, she'd been just a kid to most of them, a leader to the 100, but ultimately just the Chancellor's Omega daughter. When she'd left, she'd been a self-made sacrifice to the leader of their enemies, a possession to be traded for their safety.

Now...now she wasn't sure just who she was. She wasn't sure who they needed her to be.
Her role had been clear in the beginning. The 100 had needed a leader, someone to take responsibility and keep them alive as long as it took for their families to join them. When the rest of the Arkers came down, her role hadn't changed much. She knew more about the ground and their enemies than her mother or Kane ever could and despite their reluctance to listen, Clarke had known that it was up to her to keep everyone alive. Just like always.

Clarke had willingly given up that position when she'd agreed to become someone's slave, regardless of how her situation had ultimately turned out to be. The Arkers couldn't know that Lexa wasn't the heartless Alpha she pretended to be. They couldn't know that she was as hard-headed as she was cunning or that she would do most anything to keep her people alive.

They couldn't know that she treated Clarke like an equal.

To her fellow Arkers, Clarke was an unknown in many ways. No longer the simple Omega she used to be, but the Commander's mate - legally, she was no longer one of them, even if the sole intention of getting married had been to unite them.

Clarke sighed and blinked up into the sky. It was streaked a deep red, the edges already shifting into a star-speckled purple. They'd been traveling for the better part of the day and Clarke's thighs had gone numb hours ago.

"How much further is it?" she asked the warrior walking closest to her horse, studying the forest around them. It was the same road they'd taken the last time, but she'd been understandably distracted at the time and didn't recognize any of the trees or bushes.

"We have just passed the halfway point, Komheda."

Clarke spared another glance at the darkening sky above them, then down at her horse and the bored warriors around her. She sighed.

"We'll make camp here for tonight," she ordered, pulling at the mare's reigns to halt her in her tracks. "And arrive at Camp Jaha tomorrow."

"Yes, Komheda."

To Clarke's surprise, the Grounders around her mobilized immediately to prepare for the night, working together to collect wood for a fire and make the side of the road as comfortable as possible. She wasn’t used to being obeyed so readily, much less by men and women far older than her.

Clarke slid off her horse slowly and carefully, stretching her numb legs with a grimace. She wasn't looking forward to the muscle soreness in the morning, though she knew she couldn't relax just yet.

Taking great care not to disturb the horse as she loosened the straps holding her bedroll on its back - she still didn't feel too comfortable around large animals - she grabbed the folded blanket and turned to look for a place to lie down.

The fire was already roaring to life under the Grounders' watchful eyes and Clarke placed her bedroll down close to it, looking around for something to do. Her horse had been led a short distance away and was being carefully groomed, a few of the Grounders seemed to be ready to go for a short hunt while it was still light out and those who were not otherwise occupied had taken out their weapons to clean them.

Clarke was at a loss.

There wasn't much for her to do without Lexa around. The Grounders were far more experienced in
surviving in the wilds and she knew she'd only hold them back if she tried to interfere.

In TonDC, she'd spent most of her evenings planning their upcoming battles or just talking with Lexa about most anything at all - even when their plans had been at a standstill, she'd never been bored.

Without any Alphas around, Clarke’s head was clearer than it had been in weeks. For once, there was no muted hum of arousal in her belly, no confusion about how much of her attraction stemmed from being an Omega.

It was just her and her thoughts, and the realization that it was still possible to become bored even in this world.

Hesitantly, she grabbed a thin stick from the ground, inspecting it critically. Her hand hovered for a long moment before she knelt down and began to draw careful lines into the soft earth. The movements were still familiar to her, though the act itself seemed like a memory more than anything else - distant and strange.

Much like reading, drawing was a part of her life she'd thought she'd left behind when she came to Earth.

It was as soothing as she remembered.

Slowly, the lines flowed together to create the shape of trees, huts and buildings, armoured people milling about, until she was looking at a picture of TonDC - crude due to the lack of proper tools, but unmistakably the image she remembered seeing whenever she looked out the window of their hut.

Before she could stop herself, something else took shape. Clarke wasn’t quite sure what she was aiming for, what the blurry picture in her mind would manifest itself to be. When she thought she could make out a pair of eyes – deep brown, once kind and now empty and sad – she stopped short.

That she’d be seeing Finn again was a certainty she’d diligently pushed down.

She looked down at the shapes, realizing that she’d almost forgotten how different one perceived even ordinary things once they were put down on paper – or earth, in this case. With a heavy breath, she shook her head and swiped the sole of her boot over the drawing, stomping the pattern back into the ground and dooming the half-finished shape to recede back into her mind.

There were plans to devise and problems to contemplate. Whatever she wanted, if she could ever really recognize what that was, it would have to wait.

“Komheda.”

Clarke looked up at the tall Beta warrior, swiftly wiping the dirt from her hands. “Yes?”

“Our hunters have returned,” the man said, jerking his head towards the group huddled around the fire and staring at the treeline. “They believe we are being followed.”

Clarke swallowed, following their gaze towards the dark forest. Without the light of the sun, every shadow might be an enemy, every rustling of leaves a signal of danger.

“You and you,” she spoke up, pointing at two of the hunters. “Come with me.”

Again, none of them hesitated to follow her orders, leaving the rabbits they had hunted to be skinned by someone else, and joined her side.
The forest was eerily quiet save for the sound of their boots on the ground. Clarke’s boots, to be more precise. The Grounders beside her were far more adept at treading silently than she could ever hope to be.

“Did you see who was following us?” Clarke asked quietly, scanning their surroundings and laying her hand on the gun strapped to her thigh, ready to pull and aim at a moment’s notice. After being cornered by Quint, she would not be caught unaware again.

“No. We only caught footsteps. A snapping branch, fleeing animals. It might not be cause for worry, but the Commander has instructed us to report anything of note.”

Clarke nodded, casting a calculating look up at the sky. “It’s getting dark. We won’t be able to follow any traces. Let’s do a sweep of the surrounding area before we head back to camp.”

With what little light remained, even finding those footsteps again would be improbable. It was a risk, but posting guards during the night would have to do if their search yielded nothing.

“Let’s split up and circle around. We’ll meet up back here.”

One of the Grounders cleared his throat. “The Commander has made it very clear that we are to protect you.”

Clarke opened her mouth to protest, but decided differently. She had a gun and she could pull the trigger as well as anyone else, but she wasn’t made for combat.

“Fine,” she relented, jerking her head. “One of you comes with me.”

The larger of the two walked to her side and they set off, deeper into the forest – though always careful to not stray too far. The trek was quiet, Clarke’s breathing too audible in the stillness as she raised her gun.

She detected no sign of anyone out here. Shadows, sounds – none of it was out of the ordinary in the woods so late in the evening.

Clarke was about to halt and urge the man beside her to return to the camp instead of stumbling around in the dark when a curious sound reached her ears. Most of it was swallowed by the light breeze blowing through the leaves, but once Clarke thought to listen, it was impossible to ignore the whisper-quiet noise.

Like feet sneaking across the moss-covered ground.

Clarke looked pointedly at her companion and he nodded, evidently aware of the sound, before drawing his sword with a metallic hiss and stalking towards the source of the noise.

Following after him was a slow procedure for Clarke – untrained as she was, she had to be careful to mimic his steps as closely as she could, attempting to regulate her breathing.

Before she could ask for him to slow down, his head jerked towards a noise Clarke hadn’t heard. He raised his hand, signaling for her to stay put, and disappeared between the trees swiftly and silently.

She was suddenly grateful for the soothing smell wafting from the jacket around her shoulders. Clarke breathed in deeply, the scent stronger, more potent, now that she was concentrating on it.

Goosebumps rose on her skin.
She couldn't tell whether it was a mistake to allow herself to become so dependant on something as fleeting as a smell.

The sudden snapping of a branch to her left – quick, loud, *someone running at her* - caused a pin prick of dread to shiver through her. The image of Quint appeared before her inner eye, the sight of his sword at her throat, the feeling of the blade's cold metal pressing against her throat.

Except this time she was ready.

Her gun was up and aiming, her finger taut against the trigger, even before she whirled around to face her attacker.

They were fast.

The shadow had side-stepped and evaded the barrell of Clarke's loaded gun before she'd fully found her footing and Clarke followed her instincts - Omega instincts; protect yourself, don't get caught, don't let them take you - as she continued her body's rotation and crashed her shoulder into the assailant's torso. Hard.

Clarke hadn't been in a fistfight since was ten (and so angry at some kid who'd called Wells a Beta bitch that she'd taken a swing at him) and she'd forgotten how much it could hurt.

The shadow gasped and stumbled back. Clarke took the chance to press her gun into the soft skin beneath their chin - and almost jerked back when two deep green, frantic eyes stared back at her.

"Lexa?" she panted, the gun in her grip trembling. She acknowledged that the smell should have tipped her off, even if she'd chalked it up to her jacket. It was far too fresh, far too warm, to be the remains clinging to herself. Even blind, the musk was unmistakable.

The Commander merely continued to stare at her, head tipped back and throat moving as she swallowed against the cold metal.

Clarke forced her trigger finger to relax and carefully moved it to a safer place before breathing out shakily and pulling the gun away from Lexa's skin.

"I could have killed you," she said, clicking the safety back on. Only when she'd holstered the weapon did the tense set of the Alpha's shoulders loosen.

"You could have," Lexa confirmed brusquely. "But you hesitated."

Clarke shook her head. "It's a good thing I did."

"If it had been anyone but me, it could have made the difference between life and death."

"Are you saying I should have killed you?" Clarke asked, raising her brow incredulously.

Lexa hesitated and Clarke got the distinct feeling that the Commander wanted to answer with a resounding ‘Yes’. "No, of course not. But," The Alpha’s expression hardened. "You need to be able to protect yourself."

Clarke opened her mouth to reply before squinting her eyes in the near-dark, spotting something white peeking out from beneath the plates of the Commander's armour. She stepped closer, reaching out to run her hand along the coarse fabric. Fresh bandages.

"What happened?" Clarke frowned, finally remembering that Lexa was not supposed to be here.
"Why aren't you in TonDC?"

Lexa's eyes roamed the forest around them, the scent of her rut momentarily intensifying as her eyes narrowed.

"Maungedakru. Two of them attempted to kill me."

"They sent assassins after you?"

They'd already attacked her once, but it hadn't been to kill her, not yet. If the Mountain Men were getting desperate enough to want to finish the job, then things were far more dire than they'd anticipated.

The Alpha laid her hand against the small of Clarke's back as she steered her back towards camp, fingers twitching like she was trying not to grab her tighter.

"Yes. And they will try and kill you, too."

Lexa's jaw twitched, sweat glistening on her temples, and Clarke realized she had to have ridden like the devil himself was on her heels to get here as fast as she did.

Clarke suddenly remembered the Grounder still out there searching for the source of those steps – steps that might have been the Commander’s or could end up getting him killed.

"Lexa, wait."

"You need to get back to safety, Clarke," Lexa growled, baring her teeth. "They can see us in the dark."

Clarke remembered. The Mountain Men had technology the Grounders couldn't possibly understand, much less emulate.

"The warrior who was with me – he’s still out there."

Lexa’s steps didn’t so much as falter, though Clarke saw the stormy frown building above her eyes.

"My warriors are capable fighters," she simply said, her gait quickening as the light of the camp fire became visible through the trees. "He will report back if he can."

While Clarke was gone, the Grounders – both those who’d gone with Clarke and those Lexa had brought with her - had been organized into groups of twos and stationed around the camp’s perimeter.

"You think the Mountain Men would risk attacking the camp?"

The Alpha shook her head, spine still rigid as steel even as they passed into the safety of their camp. "It’s more likely that they will wait until either of us poses a vulnerable target, but I would rather not be proven wrong."

Ryder approached them dutifully and nodded when Lexa gave him a hurried order in Trigedasleng. He avoided looking at either of them, lowering his head in a submissive gesture before scampering off.

Clarke’s eyes flickered worriedly between unblinking green eyes and the vein pulsing nervously in Lexa’s neck.
"Come with me." Lexa's tone brooked no argument and Clarke followed her quietly – and too confused by the hasty, hurried energy wafting from the Commander with every step - to the edge of their make-shift camp until the last of Lexa's warriors was just out of sight.

"Shouldn't we stay with the others?" Clarke asked, watching their surroundings carefully.

"We're safe here." The Commander jerked her head towards the trees around them and Clarke understood. She was very familiar with the Grounder brand of tactics after having been on the receiving end for so long. For all that she'd spent most of her time on Earth being terrified of what they'd all thought were monsters lurking in the branches, knowing they were waiting and ready to protect her at a moment's notice was almost comforting now.

Lexa led them into a small clearing and went to stand in the center.

"What are we doing here?" Clarke prompted. It hadn't escaped her notice how tense the Alpha was, tenser than Clarke could justify, even with Lexa having nearly been killed again in so many weeks. It reminded her of the first day of Lexa's rut, albeit this restlessness around her tasted of aggression – fear - rather than simple arousal.

The Commander breathed out sharply and Clarke twitched at the metallic clang of her sword slipping out of its sheath.

She knew that Lexa wouldn't hurt her, but she felt a flutter of relief nonetheless when the weapon was thrown onto the mossy ground to Lexa's right. The memory of Quint was still too fresh in her mind.

When Lexa began to unstrap her armour, a decidedly different kind of flutter started brewing in her lower stomach.

"Take it off," Lexa ordered, gesturing towards the holster around Clarke's thigh - and it was an order alright, all sharp and clipped and delivered in much the same way the Alpha would speak to her guards.

Clarke's fingers were tugging at the straps of leather before she’d made a conscious decision to do so, letting the gun glide into the wisps of grass.

She swallowed as Lexa slid out of her coat, revealing bare arms glistening with sweat and twitching muscles. Clarke half-expected her shirt to follow and bit back the slight twinge of disappointment when the Alpha instead turned to face her with a carefully neutral expression.

Lexa’s spine straightened, shoulders pulled back and legs pressed together solidly as she crossed her arms behind her back and fixed Clarke with a steely look.

“Attack me.”


“I said,” Lexa ground out, pulling back her lips into a snarl. “Attack me. You need to be able to defend yourself, Clarke.”

Clarke pulled her eyebrows into a frown, hands balling into fists. Defending herself was one thing, but attacking a friend entirely another. She had no doubt that she wouldn’t be able to so much as scratch Lexa, but she hesitated nonetheless.

“Fine,” she finally said, albeit unhappily, when Lexa simply waited, stepping closer until they were face to face. The Alpha showed no reaction as Clarke gritted her teeth and pulled back her arm.
Clarke felt entirely out of her element, preparing to punch someone who showed no signs of defending themselves. Only the knowledge that Lexa would no doubt evade her clumsy attack made her gulp down her apprehension and swing her fist forward.

Lexa did not, in fact, move.

Clarke’s eyes widened as her knuckles connected solidly with flesh and bone, even as she attempted to take the force out of her movement. The Commander’s head jerked to the side, an angry red spot instantly forming on the side of her jaw.

“Shit, Lexa-“

“Again.”

The Alpha fixated her anew, raising her chin and reaching out to tap the back of her hand. “Keep your thumb on the outside of your fist and your wrist angled downward. Don’t hesitate or you’ll hurt yourself more than you hurt me.”

Clarke swallowed and pulled her fist back again, awkwardly attempting to follow Lexa’s instructions.

She couldn’t bring herself to put her whole strength behind the punch. Instead, her knuckles scraped past Lexa’s jaw without doing much damage, just barely clipping the side of her ear.

“You can’t keep hesitating,” Lexa said tersely, shaking a strand of hair out of her face. “If you do, sooner or later someone like Quint will get to you.”

“I can’t just punch someone in the face who’s not defending themselves,” Clarke hissed, pulling her shoulders up at the reminder of how she’d almost been killed. “Especially not someone who’s already hurt.”

She gestured towards the bandages around Lexa’s upper arm, noting the way the limb shook, how her tanned face was pale even in the low evening light.

“Very well.” The Alpha nodded, dropping into a fighting stance fluidly. “Don’t aim for my face. Without proper training, you will only break your hand.”

Clarke gritted her teeth in frustration, attempting to emulate the stance. “Where else am I supposed to hit you, then?”

Lexa’s face didn’t so much as twitch as she laid two finger against her throat. “Here. It will either damage my windpipe or, if I see the punch coming, bring my chin in line with your fist.” Her palm went to cover her bandaged arm. “I’m already wounded. Take advantage of that.”

Finally, her hand slid down to cover her groin. “Aim here with the right amount of force and it will incapacitate me long enough for you to finish it.”

Clarke blinked and tore her eyes away from the sight of the Commander’s long fingers cupping her crotch, shaking the memory of her own hand squeezing that particular area.

“Most importantly,” Lexa explained, holding Clarke’s stare. “Do not hesitate. If you see an opening, take it.”

Clarke exhaled harshly and nodded her head, tightening her fists. Her first, weak punch went nowhere, the Commander’s torso twisting at the last second to evade the attack.
“Look into my eyes, don’t let me see where you’re planning to hit.”

Her second punch only barely grazed Lexa’s right shoulder, her aim off now that she wasn’t looking at her hands anymore.

The Alpha’s brows drew together sharply. “Faster. Move your legs.”

Clarke tried, she really did, but her thighs shook from riding a horse all day and she could barely get her feet off the ground, much less move them with any sort of grace. Her stumbling movements and uncoordinated swings caused her to flail wildly and her punches to miss any and all of Lexa’s more vulnerable parts.

“If you can’t hit any key points, go for the torso,” the Alpha growled, tension evident in the downward slope of her lips.

This time, Clarke managed to drive her fist into the hard muscles of Lexa’s stomach, flinching at the pain running up her arm. It was easily evident that Lexa was fit, but Clarke still hadn’t quite anticipated it.

“Not hard enough,” Lexa said, barely out of breath. “Move your hips and shoulders, not just your arms.”

Clarke’s arms were aching, her muscles shaking from holding them up, and the frustration in her gut was threatening to bubble over. She had no idea what she was doing and Lexa’s clipped instructions weren’t helping, not like this. Her body wasn’t built for battle, wasn’t built for resisting, and it was hard not to notice it when she was confronted with someone who was.

“I can’t,” she finally snapped, letting her exhausted arms fall to her sides. “I’m not a fighter like you or your warriors. And I’m not going to hurt you on purpose.”

Lexa’s jaw worked quietly as though she was trying to hold back from snapping her teeth, back curving dangerously.

“If you wish,” she growled, turning sharply on her heel to retrieve her sword and armour. “Do not stray too far. My guards will keep an eye on you, but we don’t know how many men might have been sent after you.”

Lexa’s lips pressed into a thin line.

“And some day, I will not be there.”

Clarke watched her stalk back towards camp, watched her trembling shoulders and the strained muscles in her arms, and retrieved her gun from the ground, thinking back on the Commander’s last words. The echo of an understanding began to form in her mind.

The light of the camp fire reflected off the metal of Lexa’s armour, bathing her back in warm red light where she sat on a fallen tree away from the hustle and bustle of her warriors preparing dinner.

Her unwavering stare into the darkness of the forest did not break as Clarke sank down next to her.

“Costia,” Clarke stated quietly, pulling her jacket tighter around her shoulders as the cold breeze made her shiver. “Anya, too.”

Lexa’s shoulders twitched.
“You weren’t there when they died.”

It wasn’t an accusation, but Clarke did not miss the way the Alpha’s fingers tightened around the tree’s bark, allowing the sharp edges to bite into her skin. Slowly, Lexa let out a stuttering breath, seemingly deflating right before Clarke’s eyes.

“No, I was not.”

Clarke turned to look at the gently swaying branches above them, allowing silence to fall. It wasn’t an uncomfortable one – she’d gotten used to spending much of their time together working quietly, despite the occasional bout of unfulfilled arousal. It fit them. The calm, the stillness, it was a welcome change from the stress they both endured during the day.

They sat for some time, listening to the sounds of talking and laughter behind them until the smell of roasted meat filled the air.

Clarke wasn’t sure what she’d expected, but Lexa standing up and leaving her sitting there alone had not been it. She didn’t turn around to look after her, wondering if that had been Lexa’s way of saying she didn’t want to talk about it.

Her sigh turned into a white cloud in the crisp air.

“Here.”

Clarke blinked up at Lexa and took the plate the Commander held out, piled high with meat. Her stomach gave a deep, insistent growl at the sight – she hadn’t eaten since breakfast and riding all day had her famished.

“Thank you,” she said, waiting to eat until the Alpha had reclaimed her place beside her. It was a lot of food, she acknowledged. Far more than she could eat by herself, though Lexa didn’t seem inclined to take any of it.

Clarke’s stomach growled anew at the first bite and Lexa’s mouth twitched into the tiniest of smiles before relaxing back into her mask of neutrality.

“My parents died out in the woods, ripped to shreds by a scared animal fighting for its life,” she began, cool and matter-of-factly. Clarke listened quietly. “Costia was captured and killed while trying to get away from me, slain by people who only wished me ill.”

The food in Clarke’s mouth lost its taste and she swallowed, laying the morsel of meat in her hand back onto the plate.

“And Anya…Anya died because I sent Tristan to finish the job I believed she couldn’t.” She eyed Clarke from the corners of her eyes. “Killed by your people.”

Clarke breathed in sharply. She’d never told Lexa that it had been them who’d shot Anya down, only ever focusing on the fact that Anya was willing to propose an alliance. It had been a tactical, if selfish decision. One she regretted.

Lexa nodded her head, fingering the cord around her neck. “Yes, I knew. You were vague, evasive, when you talked about her.”

“Then why did you agree to an alliance?”

The Grounders had demanded Finn’s blood for the murder of their people, had almost killed one of
their own for an attempted assassination he hadn’t been responsible for, yet Lexa had never so much as mentioned their part in Anya’s death.

“Fear breeds desperation. We all fight for our survival, Clarke,” the Alpha answered. “We all do what we must, make the choices we can. Not all of those choices are the right ones.”

Clarke looked down at her plate blindly, wondering idly if Lexa was as lost as she was, sometimes. Whether she lay awake at night remembering all the things she had done wrong.

“You think it was your choices that ended up getting Costia and Anya killed,” she whispered. “That it was your fault for not being there to protect them.”

Just like Clarke hadn’t been there when Wells had died. Just like she hadn’t been there to save Atom, or Charlotte, or any of those they’d lost.

Lexa rubbed a thumb over her palm, tracing the little scars. “I have made a lot of mistakes during my leadership. Many of my people died because of me and they will continue to do so. It’s what we have to do, as leaders – to ask our friends and family to go to war for us, die for us. Every day and in a million different ways.”

“Does knowing it make it any easier?”

Clarke knew the answer to that question. They both did. Nothing could take that guilt away, regardless of intention.

“No, it doesn’t,” Lexa answered anyway, taking a deep breath. She twisted her torso, really, properly looking at Clarke for the first time that night.

“I have seen a lot of my people die,” she said, her eyes earnest. “I do not want you to join them.”

Clarke’s brows drew together, the corner of her mouth pulling up into an expression that couldn’t quite decide between sadness and a smile. In the time she’d known Lexa, she had never heard anyone call her by her name, not even Gustus, never seen anyone treat her as anything but the Commander, and she wondered just how alien, how rare, the concept of friendship had become to her.

How many people had walked out of her life never to return.

Clarke’s huffed out a breath and shook her head, pulling back her shoulders. “I do want to learn to defend myself and I’d be happy to have you teach me, but I can’t do it all in one day.”

Lexa nodded, sheepishly rubbing along the side of her neck. “I apologize. My rut is…testing my patience. If you truly wish to learn, we can go slow.”

“I do.” An idea formed in Clarke’s mind. “In return, I could teach you to read. If you want to, of course,” she added hastily when the Alpha merely blinked at her curiously.

Reading had always been a calming activity for Clarke, though not quite as therapeutic as drawing, and she wondered if it might do the same for the Commander.

“I would like that,” Lexa agreed hesitantly. “Though I cannot guarantee you that I will succeed.”

“You already know the language, all you need to learn is to recognize the letters.”

A quick search of the ground revealed a sharp, thin stick that would do just fine for drawing in the
mud. She gestured for Lexa to turn around so the flames of the camp fire, as distant as it was, would illuminate the earth to their feet.

“It’s really not that difficult. Our writing is made up of 26 letters, with which you can form any word. If you can remember those 26 letters, you’re good to go.”

Lexa’s forehead crinkled, the scepticism radiating from her in waves as Clarke carved a large ‘A’ into the soft earth.

“This is the first letter of the alphabet – it’s an ‘A’. Like in ‘Lexa’.”

The Alpha’s eyes narrowed as she stared down at the clean lines, silently mouthing her own name to herself. “Why do you pronounce it differently when it is part of my name?”

Clarke opened her mouth, but hesitated. “That’s a good question. I never thought about it.” She shrugged. “In general, you pronounce it as ‘ah’.”

Except when you didn’t, but Clarke figured that particular lesson could wait for later.

Lexa pulled her lips into a contemplative grimace. “Clarke. There is an ‘ah’ in your name as well?”

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth as Clarke nodded – almost unconsciously, and that really wasn’t something she was used to anymore. “There is. Starting with names might be a good idea, actually. That’s usually the first thing children learn.”

Carefully, she set the tip of the stick down and drew ‘Lexa’ into the ground. She almost asked whether the spelling was correct – maybe it was ‘Leksa’? - before remembering that the Alpha wouldn’t know.

“This is your name. See, here’s the ‘A’ at the end.”

“It’s a short word,” Lexa said and Clarke noted with some amusement how relieved she sounded.

“That it is. Look.”

Pointing at each letter in turn, Clarke explained what it was and how it was pronounced, carefully gauging the Commander’s reaction. She couldn’t remember what it was like to struggle with letters and numbers, but she knew even simple things could be a challenge if one wasn’t used to it.

“Did you get all that?”

Lexa was focusing the letters with a stare Clarke suspected she usually reserved for nearly impossible battle formations – or people like Quint.

“I do not know,” the Alpha answered absentmindedly, apparently still trying to burn the lines into her mind.

Clarke shook her head good-naturedly. “Alright, I’ll give you another word.”

Beneath Lexa’s name, she carved ‘ART’, watching the Commander out of the corners of her eyes. “Recognize any of the letters?”

“That’s an ‘ah’ – an ‘A’?”

“Very good.” Clarke gestured towards the remaining letters. “This is an ‘R’, and this is a ‘T’.” She made sure to pronounce the ‘T’ with a sharp flick of her tongue, the way it would sound at the end of
a word. “Do you think you can tell me what the word says?”

Lexa’s head jerked and her eyes widened, gaze flickering between the carved lines in the ground and Clarke’s carefully blank expression. She fixated the word, opening her mouth and pronouncing the letters slowly under her breath.

“Art,” she whispered clumsily, then more confident. “Art. It says art.”

“Well done.”

A small smile lit up Lexa’s face and Clarke couldn’t help but find it charming. As intimidating as she could be and as powerful an Alpha as she was, a simple compliment still made her feel accomplished, it seemed.

“Let’s try another,” Clarke suggested, swiping away the words to make room and slowly writing her own name into the earth.

“This is a ‘C’, but it’s pronounced as a ‘K’.” She pointed to the letters. “‘L’. And another ‘K’.”

Her name wasn’t an easy thing for a beginner – either to write or to read.

Long moments went by in which Clarke waited with bated breath and Lexa’s expression became increasingly frustrated.

“I don’t recognize the word,” the Alpha grumbled unhappily, a deep furrow appearing between her brows at the admission.

“The ‘E’ is silent,” Clarke hinted.

The Commander sent her an unsure look before focusing back on the letters to her feet. Clarke pressed her lips together to hold back a chuckle when Lexa leaned forward to glare at the word with cool, narrowed eyes as though it had personally offended her. Or like it would cave in and reveal its meaning if only she scared it into submission.

When a threatening growl started to build in Lexa’s chest and a deeply dissatisfied whine escaped her throat, Clarke clapped a hand over her mouth. What came out instead of a laugh was a highly undignified snort, her shoulders shaking from suppressed mirth.

The Alpha’s head jerked up and Clarke didn’t want to laugh, she really didn’t, but there was a distinct redness creeping up the Commander’s neck and Lexa couldn’t quite meet her eyes and Clarke was now very sure that Lexa hadn’t noticed she’d been trying to show the nasty letters who’s the Alpha around here and-

“You’re laughing at me,” Lexa accused, cheeks burning even brighter when not even Clarke’s hand could stop the laughter from bubbling up her throat.

Clarke tried to quell the familiar, yet rusted sounds bursting from her chest, but it was useless. Every time she looked at Lexa’s face and saw the troubled embarrassment (not a pout, of course, never a pout), a new wave of amusement would make her eyes tear up. Not even the curious glances some of the other Grounders sent them could bring her to a halt.

“I’m sorry,” she wheezed eventually, looking up through teary lashes. The redness still lingered on Lexa’s cheeks, though not as harshly as before, and it was the odd look in her eyes more than anything that finally allowed Clarke to calm down. “I wasn’t trying to laugh at you, I swear. The word – it’s my name. And I know it’s difficult, probably not suited to a beginner. You’re doing well,
really well.”

The Commander licked her lips, having gone very quiet.

A part of Clarke still expected Lexa to react as any other Alpha would – to reprimand her for making a fool of her in front of others, for hurting her pride – but she really should have known better.

“It’s alright,” Lexa said roughly, watching Clarke’s face with rapt attention. Her focus was precise and insistent, and Clarke recognized the expression now, knew what it meant when the Commander’s eyes traced the mark on her throat before gliding lower.

She clamped down on the memories of a lean body pressed against hers, teeth buried in her throat, hot lips on hers, warm palms on her body, do you have any idea what you do to me-

“We should continue this another time,” Lexa said in a clipped tone, standing abruptly and almost knocking the half-full plate from the fallen log in her haste to bring some distance between them. “There’s more food if you want it.”

Lexa left before Clarke could respond, frame taut and shoulders tense enough to make Clarke fear they might snap, and Clarke did not have to take a whiff of the pheromone-laden air or look at her awkward gait to know where the Alpha was off to.

With a groan, she realized that without any way to wash the scent off her, she would not be free to do the same.

Clarke shuddered violently and turned onto her back, holding back a groan when the muscles in her legs inadvertently tensed and quivered. One half of her body was warmed from the fire, the other was freezing in the crisp air, and along with the muscle soreness that was already forming, sleep wasn’t coming to her.

Most of the Grounders around her had already gone to sleep, quiet breathing or snoring filling the air, though the guards were still out and about. They kept a respectful distance from her bedroll, which meant at the very least she wasn’t bothering anyone with her constant twisting and turning.

She shuddered again, burying her cold nose into the collar of her jacket. She wondered what they would do once winter hit them full-force, what the Arkers would do. Their accommodations weren’t suited to protecting them from the cold – most of them slept outside without so much as a blanket, food was scarce as well, lakes would freeze over and threaten their water supply.

Some of them wouldn’t make it.

Clarke only noticed the quiet footsteps when they came to a halt next to her.

“Clarke?”

She opened her eyes and blinked up at the dark form, recognizing the braids and armour instantly. Lexa knelt down at her side.

“I did not mean to wake you.”

Clarke breathed in deeply and instantly regretted the action. She could smell exactly what Lexa had been doing, even if the scent was already starting to fade.

The Betas were blissfully unaware, but she saw Ryder lingering near them, his nose twitching and
his suspicions undoubtedly not having been laid to rest as completely as she’d hoped.

“You didn’t,” she said and cleared her throat, sitting up to properly face the Alpha. “I couldn’t sleep anyway.”

Lexa nodded. “You’re sore. It’s to be expected.”

In more ways than one, Clarke thought and shifted on her blanket. She stilled when the Commander laid both hands on her right thigh, palms warm through the fabric of her pants.

“May I?”

She waited and, when Clarke did not protest, began kneading the muscles with a firm grip and sure movements. Clarke winced at the pain, her breath stuttering to a shaky halt.

“It hurts, but it will help in the morning,” Lexa muttered, concentrating on loosening the muscles beneath her palms. “Otherwise you may not be able to move.”

Once the initial pain had passed, Clarke became very aware of the friction of the Alpha’s fingers massaging her thigh. Lexa never strayed too far towards any area that could be considered inappropriate, but Clarke felt the heat of her hands on her inner thigh and knew that the Alpha couldn’t have missed the scent of her building wetness.

The Commander’s movements were quick and efficient, methodical, and she switched legs far sooner than Clarke would have liked.

She couldn’t hold back a quiet groan when Lexa’s fingers dug into a particularly tense spot, quickly pressing her lips together.

“Stop me if the pain is too much,” the Commander told her with a slight frown, moving from her thigh down to her lower leg to repeat the procedure.

“It’s fine.” Clarke looked away from the sight of Lexa kneeling almost between her legs, catching some of the guards watching them from the corners of their eyes and the sneer on Ryder’s face.

Lexa worked silently and Clarke allowed herself to slip into a near-trance, closing her eyes and almost forgetting the need in her belly as she listened to the noise of the crackling fire.

“I should have asked you,” she whispered tiredly, leaning back on her forearms. “Before I kissed you.”

The hands on her leg froze for the smallest of moments before fluidly continuing their ministrations.

“We agreed that more physical contact between us would be necessary. I have not changed my mind.”

Clarke hummed in the back of her throat. “Still, I should have given you a warning, at least. We’re not…”

The Commander ceased her massage and Clarke’s eyes blinked open with a start at the heat of a body suddenly hovering above her. Lexa’s gaze flicked up for a split-second before she braced her hand on the blanket next to Clarke’s shoulder and leaned down.

Her hair fell to cover them both, creating an illusion of intimacy, and Clarke swallowed and waited with wide eyes as full lips neared hers.
The kiss was light and chaste, a peck that only barely grazed her lips. She shivered when Lexa exhaled softly, warm breath ghosting over her mouth and chin. One of her hands still rested on the side of Clarke’s thigh.

“He’s gone,” the Alpha whispered after a few moments, quietly enough so only Clarke would hear, and brushed her mane of hair back over her shoulder. At Clarke’s inquisitive look, she subtly inclined her head to the right.

Clarke followed her cue only to see Ryder making his rounds. His back was curved unhappily and Clarke had no doubt that he’d expected to catch something he wasn’t supposed to.

He nearly had, she acknowledged with a frown. “Is he ever going to give up?”

“Ryder is a good warrior because he is observant,” Lexa answered, retreating swiftly as she rocked back onto her heels. “And he’s not a fool. He knows that I will not tolerate his antics much longer.”

Clarke nodded and wrapped her arms around herself. Without a warm body above her, the cold began to creep back into her limbs.

“You will still be sore in the morning,” Lexa continued. “Stretching will help.”

Clarke wasn’t quite sure she could move in the morning, much less stretch. She’d thought she’d been done with sore muscles after the first few weeks on the ground, but riding a horse all day was an entirely different kind of exhaustion.

The Alpha made to get up and Clarke raised an eyebrow. “Where are you going?”

“To stand guard.”

She caught Lexa’s wrist, eyeing the bandages and the fast thrumming of her pulse with a frown. “You’re always awake before me, you’ve covered the same distance in not even half the amount of time and you’re injured.”

The Commander cocked her head, expression inquisitive, like she wasn’t sure why Clarke would be bothered by any of that.

“I know you’re an Alpha and I know your people expect you to be stronger than any of them, but even you need to rest.”

Clarke demonstratively scooted over to make room on the blanket, looking up at Lexa expectantly. The Alpha blinked, frozen and unsure.

“What will your warriors think if you spend the night doing their job instead of being with your mate?”

Alphas were expected to want Omegas, badly, and it was bound to shed a negative light on one of them – either on Clarke for not being ‘Omega’ enough, for not being desirable enough, or on Lexa for not being a proper Alpha.

Either way, it wouldn’t help them.

Lexa exhaled harshly and gave a jerky nod before unclasping her armour with hesitant movements. She stopped as soon as the bulkiest pieces had hit the ground and gingerly eased onto the thin blanket, crossing her arms in front of her body and fixing her gaze on the stars above them.
Clarke sighed, taking it as a small victory. She laid down with her back to the Commander and closed her eyes, hoping sleep would come easier now.

Every breath filled her nose with the scent of Alpha, softer now that Lexa was calm and at least momentarily satisfied, and it caused Clarke’s shoulders to relax, the tension in her body draining away. The thoughts her mind could never seem to let go became distant and blurry, turning from incessant worry into vague memories of her father and Wells, of evenings spent discussing chess strategies or making bets on who would win those long-gone football matches.

Her teeth chattered as a particular harsh gust of wind blew past her and she curled in on herself, pulling her legs up against her stomach.

There was movement next to her and then a second blanket – no, a coat – was draped over her trembling shoulders.

She made a dissatisfied noise and pulled the fabric away from her, inching back bit by bit until Lexa’s body-heat seared into her back.

“’s too cold,” she mumbled, just so managing to keep the coat lifted instead of drifting off. Lexa shifted closer slowly, careful not to touch her, until the piece of cloth covered them both.

With the heat building undeneath the make-shift blanket, the fire warming her front and the deceptively safe scent of Alpha all around her, Clarke found it worryingly easy to let sleep claim her.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

In which they're back at the Ark, Abby is worried and Finn tries to talk.

Clarke’s lips pulled into a grimace as she adjusted her position in the saddle.

Lexa had been right – she was as sore as she could ever imagine being, despite the massage and the bout of stretching the Alpha had forced upon her first thing in the morning.

The Commander had already been up by the time Clarke even thought of opening her eyes, as she always was, and Clarke had spent a precious few moments burying deeper into the two layers of clothes wrapped around her before remembering that she couldn’t sleep away the day while everyone else was preparing to continue their journey.

And then the pain had set in.

She supposed she ought to be grateful she wasn’t suffering cramps, Clarke thought, even as the muscles in her legs and behind screamed in agony. Her arms weren’t doing much better, the stiff position she was forced to hold them in taking its toll on her shoulders.

“If you wish to take a break…” Lexa intoned from beside her, the strong movements of her legs and hips looking effortlessly elegant. Clarke had tried to imitate her, but the ache in her body had soon made her give up on anything but staying in the saddle.

“If I take a break, we’ll never make it to Camp Jaha.”

She wasn’t joking. If she stopped and got off, there was a distinct possibility she might never get on again. And she wouldn’t let herself signal weakness by asking to ride with Lexa again, not when the Grounders had just started giving her their grudging respect.

Despite her discomfort, a break was something they couldn’t afford, not while the threat of the Mountain Men hoping to kill two birds with one stone still hung in the air. The Beta warrior from yesterday hadn’t returned after their forray into the woods, most likely either killed or captured. Considering how the Mountain Men dealt with their prisoners, death seemed like the more desirable option.

The night had passed in peace, but that just meant they were biding their time. It was too much to hope Lexa’s unexpected arrival had caused them to turn tail and flee.

Clarke didn’t pay much attention to the Grounder walking up to Lexa’s horse to converse quietly in Trigedasleng, not until Lexa stiffened in her seat and pulled the reins tight.

“Clarke, get off your horse,” she said tersely, steering her horse into an akward angle until it seemed almost like a barrier between Clarke and the still forest beyond.

Clarke knew that tone and didn’t hesitate to follow the order, ignoring the twinge in her muscles as she swung a leg over the back of the large animal and slid to the ground.
The Alpha followed her example, keeping her head ducked.

“Indra and Octavia found them,” she explained at Clarke’s quizzical stare, turning on her heel to take in as much of their surroundings as she could. “Two of the Mountain Men were preparing to take a shot at you.”

The inkling of a plan formed in Clarke’s mind, instilling a sense of urgency in her bones. “Where are they?”

Without waiting for an answer, Clarke fixed the Grounder who had brought the news with a hard stare. “Bring me to them, now.”

The scout chanced a glance in Lexa’s direction, waiting for her go-ahead. Clarke knew the Alpha was aware of it, but Lexa studiously did not react to the Beta’s silent question, instead waiting for him to come to a decision on his own.

It was one thing for them to listen to her when Lexa wasn’t present, Clarke knew, but entirely another for them to follow her orders when the Alpha in charge (of her, of them) might disapprove.

“Of course, Komheda,” he said finally, unsure, and gestured for her to follow him.

The Commander inclined her head at his decision, satisfied, and turned green eyes towards Clarke as she waited for her to lead the way. It was a subtle show of trust, a mere nudge for her warriors to consider Clarke more than just their Commander’s Omega.

Clarke swallowed and hesitated, just for a moment, before acknowledging the sentiment with a grateful nod.

They broke through the foliage just as Octavia’s sword threatened to fall and sever flesh from bone.

“Wait,” Clarke called out sharply, rushing towards them. “Don’t kill him.”

She took in the scene with a cursory glance – two figures in hazmat suits, one dead on the ground, the other wheezing as he kneeled at Octavia’s feet, Octavia still waiting with her sword raised in the air and Indra watching over her with a keen eye.

The kneeling man was obviously hurt, blood seeping form the tear in his suit, though Clarke knew the radiated air was much more likely to do him in than the wound was.

“Look for a patch kit,” she ordered, already kneeling to look through one of the bags on the ground. “He’ll die if we don’t get his suit repaired.”

Octavia’s expression darkened and she didn’t lower her sword. “Clarke…”

“Just trust me.”

She huffed, lips thinning into a stubborn line, but sheathed her sword and followed her instructions after just a moment, bending down to rummage through the suit’s nooks and crannies.

Her own bag shielded nothing but a bunch of photographs – of TonDC, the Grounders, but most importantly of her and Lexa, their faces marked in thick red lines.

Clarke barely spared a glance as Lexa crouched down next to her, the Alpha’s voice quiet enough so only she would hear. “He tried to kill you, Clarke.”
The strained words were accompanied by a nervous shift of her shoulders, thighs taut like she was contemplating finishing the job herself.

Clarke handed her the picture of them, the Alpha momentarily startled at the evidence of just how clinically the Mountain Men had worked.

“He has information. Information that could help us against the Mountain Men.”

“Or he will try again next chance he gets.” The photograph crumpled as Lexa’s fingers twitched towards the handle of her sword. “You have seen what they do. They would not show you the same mercy.”

Clarke frowned, catching sight of the sweat beading on the Alpha’s temple - she’d hardly gotten an opportunity to get rid of her excess energy yesterday, though Clarke suspected their talks and the reading had helped distract her somewhat.

“Maybe not, but we can use him,” she said, keeping very still. “He’ll be safe in the Ark, but he won’t be able to leave without killing himself.”

The Commander’s teeth clenched, but before she could answer one way or the other, Octavia made a triumphant noise in the back of her throat and slapped what looked like a band-aid over the suit’s tear, a bit rougher than strictly necessary. Fortunately for him, he’d passed out some time ago and most likely wouldn’t feel much of anything.

“Alright,” Octavia said, standing up and approaching Clarke. “It’s done, he probably won’t die. What do you-”

She stopped abruptly, one foot hovering mid-step, and clasped a hand over her nose.

“What the hell,” she muttered, grimacing at the scent of Lexa’s rut wafting past her. “So that’s what that smell was.”

Octavia was mated to Lincoln and it gave her some immunity to other Alpha’s scent, but even she couldn’t remain unaffected when confronted with the pheromones of someone quite as powerful as the Commander of the Grounders.

Lexa’s frame tightened, eyes falling on Octavia’s form, and Clarke had the distinct feeling that this – angry, in rut and surrounded by two Omegas, even if one of them was mated – would not end well.

She grabbed Lexa’s thigh before the Commander’s inner Alpha could decide to lunge at either one of them, and squeezed the muscles beneath her palm. “Don’t.”

Lexa blinked, her head jerking in surprise.

“Octavia is mated to one of your warriors, remember?” Clarke muttered quietly, carefully taking away her hand now that she had the Commander’s attention. She remembered what Lexa had told her shortly after Gustus had nearly died. “You don’t want to enforce your dominance in that way. You could, I know you could, but you don’t want to.”

The Alpha grunted and closed her eyes, her rigid form loosening. When she finally nodded in agreement, it was stiff, but earnest.

Clarke caught Octavia’s eye and was startled to see them dark and narrowed, suspicion shining in them. Suspicion, or was it disgust? Clarke couldn’t tell.
“Get him to Camp Jaha as quickly as you can,” she instructed, standing up and electing to ignore Octavia’s glare for now. “See if Raven can get rid of the radiation in one of the airlocks, then get him in there and treat his wounds. We’ll catch up as soon as we can.”

She waited to see if Lexa would protest against letting him live, but the Alpha stayed completely silent, fiddling with something Clarke couldn’t make out.

“Alright,” Octavia answered tersely, seemingly content to ignore whatever was bothering her in favour of getting away from Lexa’s scent.

As they hauled the trembling body away, Clarke wondered grimly what they would do if he refused to give them what they needed.

The gates of Camp Jaha loomed before them and if Clarke had thought it would feel like coming home, she’d been wrong.

It wasn’t surprising, she supposed. She’d only spent a few days here, maybe a week if she counted the time she’d been hurt and unconscious, and she couldn’t help but miss the dropship.

It had been small and cramped and cold, and most of her memories of it involved violence and death, but it had felt more like home than this place ever could. The dropship had been theirs, in some way, a symbol of everything they’d built after they’d been sent to Earth.

And a symbol of everything they’d destroyed, Clarke thought darkly, remembering the piles of ash and bones littering the ground there now, Grounders burned alongside the graves of her friends.

All of them the same, in the end.

The guard standing watch atop the wall – the structure was unmistakably new, though sturdy – gave a shout as soon as he spotted them, waving his arm in the air.

The gates screeched as they opened and Clarke took a deep breath, inexplicably nervous. She slid off the horse before it could think to walk straight through, Lexa following her example without having to be asked.

The Alpha gestured for one of her warriors to take the reins before stepping up to Clarke’s side.

“You are nervous,” she stated. “Why?”

Clarke clenched her teeth, catching sight of the cautious crowd building just inside the gates. “I’m not one of them anymore. And I don’t know if they’ll still trust me,” she said with a heavy swallow before taking a deep breath and striding into the camp, her steps far surer than she felt.

The crowd parted before her, keeping their distance. It was much the same reaction Clarke had been fearing – part caution, part curiosity, and part distrust.

Those feelings weren’t baseless. If she’d mated with Lexa, if she’d allowed herself to become dependant on an Alpha, to become what so many of them thought of her kind, then none of them could have been sure that her priorities hadn’t shifted.

She tried to catch someone’s eye, but for all their staring, they studiously avoided her gaze.

All but one.

Finn stood at the far back of the crowd, almost hidden behind the Ark’s walls, and though he was
barely visible, Clarke saw the dark smudges under his eyes, the sad hopefulness resting in the slopes of his mouth.

She blinked and turned away sharply.

It wasn’t important right now. She couldn’t think about him, or what she’d say to him, until she’d dealt with everything else.

Or until she knew what she was going to say.

The bubble of space around her widened as Lexa came up behind her. The Commander didn’t have to make a great display of her dominance to inspire respect in the people around them and even her silence was enough to make the Arkers shuffle backwards, mumbling amongst themselves.

The Alpha laid a warm hand on the small of Clarke’s back, the calm, solid heat of her body a soothing contrast to the cool reception of her people.

The gesture would no doubt be interpreted as a claim, a warning that she stood under her mate’s protection, but Clarke understood it for the reassurance that it was - even as she was quite aware of the quiet growl building in Lexa’s chest.

She didn’t trust herself to glance at Finn again.

Her back straightened, chin raised to meet the Arker’s critical stares with confidence. She wasn’t a weak little Omega suffering from the influence of a dominant Alpha. She was still herself, still Clarke, still a leader.

The Ark’s door opened with a metallic hiss and Abby came rushing towards her, Kane following after in a decidedly less hurried fashion.

“Octavia told us what happened,” she said, worry tinging her voice, and pulled Clarke into an embrace. “Are you alright?”

Clarke pressed her eyes closed for a brief moment, her mother’s familiar scent wrapping around her like a cocoon, before she nodded firmly and broke the embrace.

“Yeah, I’m fine. We dealt with them before they could do any damage.”

Any real damage, she acknowledged with a look towards Lexa’s injured arm, shallow as the wound was.

“I’m glad to see you’re both well,” Kane greeted them with a friendly nod, offering his hand to Lexa for a shake. “Welcome, Commander. I believe this is the first time you’re seeing our camp up close.”

Lexa nodded. “It is. You have accomplished much in these last few weeks.”

Apart from the newly erected wall, the gate had been fortified and Clarke counted more than a dozen new tents and structures. It still lacked any real sense of protection or comfort, but it was more progress than she had anticipated.

“Your warriors have been very helpful. We couldn’t have done it without them.”

Clarke was hard-pressed to imagine Grounders and Arkers working alongside each other peacefully, but she was willing to believe that Indra had enough sense to keep them in line, just as Kane did.

“If you don’t mind, Commander,” Abby cut in. “I’d like a word with my daughter. Alone.”
The crowd ceased their nervous muttering, everyone’s attention focusing on the potential squabble in their midst. Abby had directed the request at Lexa, just as she was supposed to as a fellow Alpha, but the tone behind her words came close to an order. Or a challenge.

As Clarke’s legal mate, it fell to Lexa to control who was allowed to see her, if she so wished. It was an old rule based on an Omega’s perceived need for protection, though some would say it stemmed form the assumption that Omegas did not have the necessary restraint to resist any inappropriate advances.

Any other day, Clarke would not have worried about the Commander’s reaction. She’d shown on more than one occasion that she didn’t feel the need to exert control over how Clarke spent her time, but this wasn’t about Clarke at all.

It was about laying down boundaries, about establishing what role Lexa wanted to take here, with the Arkers. Whether she wanted to command them as she did the Grounders – as Clarke had offered her when she’d proposed the union – or whether she would recognize someone else’s authority despite her instincts telling her otherwise.

Lexa wasn’t new to politics and Grounder society was much more democratic than Clarke would have thought. Perhaps it was the Alpha’s doing, or perhaps it was simply how their government worked, but Lexa had proven herself to be more than willing to listen to what her advisors, warriors and people wanted.

Despite this, Clarke couldn’t begin to guess whether her mother had just inadvertently gotten in over her head.

She glanced at Lexa out of the corners of her eyes, taking in the flexing muscle in her jaw, the scent of agitation building on the edges of her limbs.

A prickle of awareness shuddered over Clarke’s skin.

The anticipation built, the crowd holding their breath in either fear or excitement, and Clarke subtly leaned back into the hand curving along her spine.

Abby’s eyes twitched towards the movement before re-focusing on the Commander.

“Very well,” Lexa eventually breathed out, her fingers against Clarke’s back momentarily stiffening before she took them away. “Take as much time as you need. In the meantime, I would like to inspect your defenses.”

The last part of her sentence was directed at Kane, who jumped to bridge the tense atmosphere. “Of course, Commander. I would be happy to show you around.”

Abby raised her chin and Clarke would have missed the quiet snarl if she hadn’t been familiar with the signs of her mother’s anger.

Lexa had shown respect by complying with the request, but while Clarke may not be an Alpha like any of them, she understood them well enough to know that concerning herself with their defenses – their protection, their safety, their vulnerability – was nearly as much of a claim as keeping Clarke to herself would have been.

The corners of Abby’s mouth twisted into a grimace as she nodded her agreement – she hadn’t won, but she also hadn’t lost, and Clarke figured the situation had been resolved as well as it could have been.
“Whenever you’re ready, Commander,” Kane said politely, trying to steer them away from further discussion as he swept his arm in a wide arc.

Lexa nodded sharply and turned to look at Clarke. The lines of her face softened, barely noticeable if it hadn’t been for the subtle arch of her brow and the relaxed slope of her lips.

“I will see you later, Clarke.”

Clarke hummed in acknowledgement, feeling the waiting gazes of her people burning into her back. The Alpha stalled for a long moment, eyes flickering to Abby and Kane, before slipping long fingers around the back of Clarke’s neck.

Her palm was warm against the side of Clarke’s throat, covering the pulsing bite mark she had left there just a few days ago, and Clarke held her breath as the Alpha leaned in.

She was inexplicably nervous.

Playing pretend in front of the Grounders had been easy – Clarke didn’t know them, didn’t know what they expected of an Omega, of her, and they only knew the person she’d become.

Some of the people that were watching them now she’d known all her life.

One of them she felt more keenly than the others, memories of haunted brown eyes playing at the edge of her consciousness, even as they threatened to swirl away like smoke as soft lips neared hers.

A part of her wanted him to see, wanted him to experience the same hurt she’d felt when Raven’s arms had wrapped around his neck, desperate and familiar.

Hurt.

At the last second and with a sharp intake of breath, Clarke turned her head subtly to the side, heat gathering in her chest and stomach even as Lexa’s lips landed at the corner of her mouth – still enough to make Clarke’s eyes slip closed and her lips tingle, but short and stiff and over before she could decide differently.

“See you later,” Clarke rasped, throat dry and dissatisfaction roiling in her belly. Lexa left with a hard swallow and an apologetic tilt of her head, one that Clarke studiously attempted not to see, and Clarke chanced a weary glance around.

Finn had left.

Abby refused to let her see the prisoner or badger Raven about whether Bellamy had reported back – he hadn’t, Raven was busy working on something else and the Mountain Man was alive, but hadn’t woken up yet.

A part of Clarke wondered, viciously perhaps, whether her mother would risk lying to her again.

In the end, she’d decided to go along with her for now, if only to avoid another unnecessary argument and because she was too exhausted to be of much use anyway. The two-day ride had taken a lot out of her and if she hadn’t been so used to forcing herself to keep going, she might have looked for the nearest blanket to collapse onto.

But there were always more things to be done and she wasn’t sure she would be able to wind down even if she could afford it.
Clarke sighed heavily as the doors finally shut behind her with a quiet hiss, rubbing the bridge of her nose in an effort to get rid of the building headache at the base of her skull. Conversations with her mother were strained nowadays. It threw Clarke back into the role of Omega daughter, struggling to obey but knowing that she could not, and she wasn’t sure how long they could keep this up before something snapped.

She walked along the quiet hallway, still unused to experiencing the metal walls that had made up her life for the longest time without the accompanying hiss of air being cycled through the filtration system at a steady, soothing rate.

Clarke contemplated searching for Lexa – whether to discuss how to improve their defenses or simply to make sure no one was stupid enough to challenge her while she was in rut she wasn’t sure – when she caught sight of something, no, someone, loitering in front of a door leading to what Clarke knew used to be sleeping quarters.

Her steps faltered as she recognized the brown hair brushing against the nape of his neck.

“Finn,” she said, clearing her throat. “What are you doing in here?”

He turned around and she just so managed to catch a glimpse of his face before he’d wrapped his arms around her torso in a desperate embrace, the breath draining from his chest.

“I missed you,” he muttered, tightening his grip.

Clarke’s hands hovered in mid-air. He was warm and firm and there was an echo of the comfort he’d provided her with that day in the bunker lingering at the back of her mind, but more than anything, it felt like a memory.

His scent seemed duller to her, for some reason, like he’d been fading for some time. She wondered if life here was taking its toll on him or if the jacket around her shoulders simply overshadowed him.

Before the situation could become awkward and the guilt could threaten to swallow her whole, Clarke returned the embrace, closing her eyes and willing the confusion in her stomach to go away.

She couldn’t tell if it was butterflies fluttering in her stomach or simply nervous discomfort.

Finn showed no signs of letting go and Clarke extracted herself from his arms with a shallow sigh, making sure to keep a measure of distance between them. Time had dulled the impact of what he’d done somewhat, had helped her forget – or maybe just ignore – everything that had gone wrong between them, but she hadn’t lost the awareness, the memory of him standing amidst cold, lifeless bodies.

“What is it, Finn? I have a lot of things to do,” she said evasively, angling her body towards the exit. Guilt throbbed at the base of her skull.

“Jackson told me to show you where you and- where you’ll be sleeping, and I wanted to talk to you.” She couldn’t meet his eyes. “Clarke, please look at me.”

Clarke clenched her teeth and took a moment to recollect herself before finally letting her gaze rest fully on his face.

Bruises.

That was all she saw for a moment – not dark smudges brought on by sleeplessness or stress, but bruises, dark and vicious, littering the skin around his eyes and cheekbones.
“What happened to you?”

He shook his head. “It’s not important.”

“Some of the bruises are fresh, they’re going to swell. And you have a cut on your cheek,” Clarke said with a frown, already reaching for the first-aid supplies she always kept in the bag at her hip. “Come on, I’ll clean it for you.”

Finn breathed out and pointed at the door behind him. “These are your quarters. We can talk in there.”

He’d already taken the first step inside before Clarke stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. “Wait.”

Finn didn’t smell as strongly as an Alpha would and his scent was less likely to linger, but the lack of windows in the room would trap the evidence of his presence.

“Lexa won’t like your scent in the room.”

He stiffened, but stepped back obediently. “Right. Of course she wouldn’t.”

There was an undertone in his quiet voice Clarke wasn’t sure she liked, but she lead him into the holding cell anyway, sure that they would not be bothered there.

Whichever way their conversation would go, Clarke would rather not have everyone else listening in on it.

He winced when they entered the room that had been a prison to him while they waited to see whether the Grounders would take him by force – or whether he would snap again.

“What happened?” she asked, opening her bag and retrieving the supplies she needed, among them the salve Nyko had given her. She had a nagging suspicion who was responsible for his injuries, but wanted to hear it from him.

“The Grounders weren’t happy to see me here.”

She took a hold of his chin and inspected the wounds critically. They weren’t as bad as they could be, certainly nothing more serious than the bruises Lexa regularly carried home from sparring, but they were numerous. It hadn’t been a singular incident.

“I’ll talk to Lexa,” she promised, dabbing the thick cream over his chin and around his eyes where the worst of the bruising was located. The cut would heal on it’s own if he kept it clean, though she suspected a scar would remain. “She can keep them in check.”

Provided she wanted to. Clarke wouldn’t be able to blame her if she refused the request – if their roles were reversed, she wasn’t sure she wouldn’t leave Finn to fend for himself.

“Don’t.” His voice was low and sad as he covered her hand on his face with his own. The stubble on his face scratched her palm uncomfortably. “It’s my fault, all of this. They could have done much worse.”

Clarke’s brow furrowed. “Letting them hit you won’t help anyone.”

“It helps me.”

Clarke didn’t know what to answer to that, couldn’t give him the reassurances he was begging her
for with dull, brown eyes, and pulled her hand away slowly.

He sighed and looked at the ground, shoulders slumping, before gazing back into her eyes. “Are you alright? It’s been a few weeks since…”

“Since I married?”

Finn flinched, a grimace twisting his lips. “Yeah. You didn’t want it, and if it hadn’t been for me, you wouldn’t have had to. If it hadn’t been for me, you wouldn’t be mated to someone you don’t love. No one deserves that, least of all you.”

Clarke re-packed the first-aid supplies and shook her head. She’d felt the same way on her wedding day – fear, tempered by obligation and duty, the worry that she would end up in exactly the kind of position she’d never wanted to be in.

“It’s not so bad,” she explained quietly. “Lexa is reasonable – more than reasonable. We’re friends.”

Finn was quiet for a long time, arm jerking like he wanted to take her hand again.

“Is that you talking,” he finally murmured, a thin, worried line appearing between his eyebrows. “Or your instincts?”

Clarke’s spine stiffened and her tone took on a warning quality. “Finn…”

“I’m not saying that you can’t distinguish between your feelings and what your body wants, we both know that’s bullshit. I just – Hell, I don’t know what I’m saying.”

Clarke lowered her head for a moment, reluctant to admit that she did have trouble making the distinction sometimes, that perhaps the difference between what she wanted and what her Omega wanted was not always as clear-cut as she’d told Bellamy so many weeks ago.

He ran a frantic hand through his hair.

“I’m just worried. I don’t know what she’s like, but she’s still an Alpha. You never wanted to belong to one, you told me so yourself. And now you do, and I can’t do a damn thing about it because I’m a Beta.”

Betas didn’t get to claim. They possessed the freedom to be themselves, yet would never be able to fight an Alpha for their rights or be as treasured as Omegas. They were free, but the world they lived in wasn’t the same.

Clarke didn’t know how she could make him understand, or if she even wanted to.

“I know you feel like you have to protect me,” she said. “But you don’t, Finn. This was my decision to make.”

Her situation was convulted and confusing and exhausting, but it worked and she didn’t feel like it was something that needed to be fixed. Not now and not by anyone who wasn’t herself.

Finn sucked in a deep breath. He wanted to say more, she knew he did, but instead he simply nodded. They stood in awkward silence for a while until Clarke sighed and allowed her features to soften.

“How are you? Apart from the ‘getting beat up’ part, I mean?”

“I’m fine. As well as I can be,” he said, his eyes clearing up just a tad. “I’ve been helping out Raven,
though I’ve mostly been doing grunt work. I don’t have the head for what she does.”

He seemed far more cheerful, talking about it, and Clarke supposed it was a good thing he was keeping himself busy.

“Jackson has offered to take me on as an apprentice. With your mother busy keeping things in check here, we don’t have enough people who can administer first-aid.”

“Are you thinking about taking him up on it?” Clarke asked, genuinely curious.

Finn had never been the type to take care of everyone. He wasn’t careless or cold-hearted, far from it, but where Clarke thought of her people, he thought of her and Raven, of his friends, first and foremost.

He blinked, glassy eyes staring at something only he could see.

“I can never make up for what I did,” he responded eventually, the remorse in his tone as genuine as he’d ever been. “I know that. I had a lot of time to think in the last weeks, to figure out why I did what I did.” His voice broke. “But I couldn’t find a single excuse.”

Clarke swallowed, the burn of tears tickling at the back of her eyes at the lost quality in his every word, his defeated posture and broken frame.

“I had my reasons, I know I did, but what it all boils down to is that the blood of those people is on my hands. I can’t turn back time, but I can at least try to prevent more death.”

Some days, Clarke wasn’t sure who she saw when she looked at Finn – whether it was the boy who’d given her comfort when she couldn’t find it anywhere else or the murderer with the shape of a trigger forever burned into the skin of his fingers.

His eyes were still hurt, still broken, but there was a spark of responsibility in his eyes that hadn’t been there before.

“It’s a good idea. The Arkers still need you, Finn.”

She hesitantly reached out to squeeze his shoulder. It didn’t leave her fingertips warm and tingly as it used to, and she pulled the limb back quickly.

Before she could leave, he caught her wrist.

“Will you ever be able to forgive me?” he wondered softly, barely audible.

Shoulders angled away from him, Clarke stopped short at the question. The topic had been inevitable, but a large part of her had hoped she would get at least one more day to clear her head, to figure out how or if she could answer the question.

“Finn…”

“I don’t expect you to do it anytime soon and I can wait as long as you need me to. I just have to know if you’ll ever be comfortable around me again.”

Clarke pulled her arm out of his grasp, but met his eyes without flinching. “I don’t know, Finn. I really don’t.”

She wondered how one rekindled a friendship that had never really been a friendship in the first place, how one came back from something like this when she couldn’t even bear to look at him for
fear of realizing she still loved him – or that she didn’t.

“I hope so,” she added, more for his sake than hers.

He watched her leave without protest, and Clarke wondered how many more people she would have to walk out on.

“What’s your opinion on our defenses?”

Clarke sank down on the edge of the bed, fidgeting on top of the comforter. She guessed the only reason they hadn’t gotten rid of it before coming down was because it was attached to the wall – one of the pull-out beds the workers had used to crash if they couldn’t afford to leave for home that day.

“Acceptable,” Lexa answered shortly, fumbling with the straps of her armour. Her face was littered with new bruises, fingers stiff as she grunted in frustration. She wasn’t in an state, but her rut was subdued and calm – which was a very good thing, considering the window-less room would trap their scent inside until morning. “It will work fine against a small group, though you would not be able to hold out against a substantial force for long.”

Clarke pushed a strand of freshly-washed hair behind her ear and got up to shoo Lexa’s hands away, making quick work of the harder-to-reach clasps. She’d watched the Alpha get rid of her armour often enough to have a good idea how to get it off.

She spent a few moments peeking beneath the bandage on Lexa’s arm, satisfied to see that the wound – the bullet had only grazed her – was clean and healing nicely. Considering how often the Grounders as a whole got themselves hurt, it was a wonder Nyko hadn’t quit his job yet.

“We should probably reinforce the walls,” she agreed. “Right now, they’re flimsy at best. We don’t have enough people who are reliable with a gun to be able to afford the kind of patrols we need.”

Clarke set the piece of armour down on the small table in the corner, huffing from the weight of it. How Lexa could stand to carry that around all day she couldn’t fathom.

“Clarke…”

“That’s another thing – they’ve been training a few of us, but that means we’re starting to run out of bullets. I don’t know how fast our people can produce more, but it’s doubtful they’ll be able to keep up. If all else fails, we’ll have to think about giving them knifes and swords instead, even if-“

“Clarke.”

Clarke’s mouth closed with a quiet click as Lexa’s hand on her shoulder brought her back from her thoughts.

Lexa shook her head. “You’re exhausted. You need to sleep, not think about things best discussed in the morning.”

“There won’t be time for that in the morning,” Clarke sighed, but sat back down on the bed anyway, slipping out of her jacket and wiggling out of her boots. “My mother wants to have a check-up first thing.”

Sleeping inside a closed space for the first time since the mountain was odd – she’d gotten used to being cold, to the sounds of nature around her, to lying on the ground – and she wasn’t certain she would be able to fall asleep right away.
Usually she’d bunk with the other Arkers in the tents, but Lexa’s status – and by extension, Clarke’s - afforded them one of the few intact beds in the entire camp.

“Is she worried you might be hurt?”

Clarke shrugged, scooting back until she rested comfortably against the headboard.

“I think she’s worried I might be pregnant.”

Abby was as much of a worrier as Clarke was and extremely slim chance or not, she’d probably rather be on the safe side.

The Commander’s eyes slid from Clarke’s neck to her stomach, her limbs stopping in the middle of taking off her coat as her gaze lingered.

“Right,” she rasped, shifting uncomfortably. “She ought not to worry, then.”

The tense silence was broken when Lexa finally pulled the coat from her rigid shoulders and spread it over the floor.

“Do you really want to sleep on the floor again?” Clarke asked, shaking her head in disbelief. “It’s metal, you’ll freeze.”

“I don’t mind it,” the Alpha explained absentmindedly, adjusting the fabric.

With a sigh, Clarke rolled off the bed and folded the blanket back, patting the space invitingly. “Come on, get in.”

Lexa pointedly did not look at the gesture. “I told you, I don’t mind sleeping on the floor.”

“I mind it. The bed is more than big enough for us both.” The stubborn tick in the Commander’s jaw told Clarke that she wasn’t convinced and with a silent apology, Clarke drove the proverbial nail home. “I sleep better when I can smell you.”

While it wasn’t untrue – having her nearby the day before provided for a better rest than she’d had in some time – she knew the sentence would, above all, tickle Lexa’s protective instincts.

The Alpha sent her a dark look beneath raised eyebrows that said she knew exactly what Clarke was doing, but huffed anyway and straightened sharply. “If you insist.”

Clarke waited until Lexa had gingerly eased herself onto the mattress and moved as far away from her as possible before crawling in herself and pulling the covers over them both.

It was strange to lie in a real bed again, wrapped in soft and most importantly clean covers. She hadn’t been able to enjoy the luxuries of Mount Weather, not while she suspected that her and her friends were in danger, and now that she was as safe as she could be, she found her earlier worries to be baseless, her eyes drifting shut even before she’d manoeuvred into a more comfortable position.

“Is it supposed to be this…soft?”

Clarke snorted quietly at the discomfort in the Alpha’s voice, like having a mattress that didn’t dig into your back was utterly unreasonable. Maybe it was, she acknowledged.

“Lexa,” she grunted sleepily, throwing out an arm to shove her shoulder, but only managing to slap it
weakly against her arm.

“Go to sleep.”
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

In which a lot of people assume a lot of things.

Chapter Notes

One day early because I have my graduation ceremony in a few hours and will be moving back home tomorrow.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Clarke awoke the next day, the last one in bed as usual, the indistinct memory of startling awake in the middle of the night tickled at the back of her mind – she remembered warmth, comfort, the sounds of deep breathing interrupted by the occasional whimper, trembling skin pressed against her back, quiet cursing in a language she didn’t understand and then the sudden absence of it all – but it was gone too soon to grasp it, swirling away like a distant dream.

She encountered Monroe standing watch at the gate, fingers tight around the butt of her gun.

"Hey, Monroe."

The Alpha's head jerked in surprise before she nodded and went to greet her with a handshake. "Clarke. I heard you were back. Everyone's talking about that little argument between your mother and the Commander."

Clarke instinctively forced herself to take shallow breaths, before remembering that she didn’t have to. Monroe was one of the least strong-smelling Alpha she had ever met, both scent and behaviour more akin to a Beta most of the time.

"It wasn't really an argument," Clarke objected. "Just the usual scuffle for dominance."

Monroe snorted. "Never got that, myself. Alpha or not, I'd rather follow orders than…-"

She broke off, coughing awkwardly. Clarke hadn't forgotten that Monroe hadn't followed orders when she was supposed to - though she would have been dead or caught in the mountain like so many others if she had.

"Have you seen the Commander?" Clarke changed the subject, looking around. Lexa wasn't in their room and she hadn't caught sight of her yet, despite Camp Jaha being of a rather miniscule size.

Monroe shrugged.

"She grabbed a few of the other Grounders and took them outside. Seemed like she was in a rush."

Clarke hummed in the back of her throat, peering past the gate. She assumed Lexa had gone to get in
a quick training session - after being cooped up with an Omega the whole night, she was probably in need of exercise.

A dull ache in her lower stomach at the implications reminded Clarke that she could do with a bit of 'exercise' herself, though she didn't know where she was supposed to find a private spot in a camp where every eye was focused on her. Outside where the Grounders had pitched their tents was not a much better solution.

“I’ll open the gate if you want to look for her,” Monroe offered.

“No, that’s okay. I’ve gotta get to Medical anyway.”

“Oh.” Monroe’s eyes widened just a tad. “Oh. Shit, of course. I mean, it hasn’t been that long since your last heat, but I suppose it’s to be expected, huh?”

Clarke’s brows furrowed in confusion. “What?”

“You’re, uh…” Monroe’s eyes flickered down to Clarke’s stomach. “You know.”

Realization dawned and Clarke blinked, remembering that for all the Arkers knew, Lexa had been breeding her non-stop during and since her first heat. Or that, at the very least, Lexa wouldn’t be able to resist taking an Omega for herself when the opportunity so readily presented itself.

They had no reason to assume Clarke wasn’t pregnant by now.

“I’m not…” Clarke caught herself. “I’m not sure yet. It might not have taken.”

While there was no conceivable way she could be pregnant, Monroe didn’t have to know that. There were too many people who were aware of her farce of a marriage as it was.

Monroe cleared her throat. “Having a kid around might not be all bad, you know.”

“What?”

She gave a lop-sided shrug and gestured towards the Arkers milling about the camp, tired bodies and tired faces trudging along to make the space livable.

“Most of us are dead now. The people here and our friends in the Mountain – they’re all that’s left. And it’s probably stupid, but the thought of a kid running around here soon? Makes me feel like we might actually make it.”

Clarke swallowed around the heavy weight in her throat. She couldn’t give them the reassurance they craved and she couldn’t give them a tangible future to look forward to, but she understood the sentiment.

They were a broken people, flung from their home into hostile environment. They’d died, killed, left behind, and even now they couldn’t be sure that they would survive even the first few months of winter.

It was a beginning that felt a lot like an end.

“We are going to make it,” she said resolutely. “We’ve been through too much to give up now. We’ll get our people back and we will not disappear.”

Monroe expelled a harsh breath and stood a little straighter. “You’re right. If anyone can do it, it’s you.” She grinned. “And I gotta say, I feel a lot better now that the Grounders are on our side.
They’re a strange bunch, what with all the fighting and stoic silences, but your Commander seems decent enough.”

Clarke diligently ignored the ‘your’. “She is. We have a better chance of surviving with them by our side than we ever did before.”

Monroe nodded, readjusting the strap of her gun on her shoulder. “I should get back to my watch. I told Miller’s Dad to double the manpower here at the wall, but we don’t have enough trained people to really pull it off.”

She scratched the back of her neck awkwardly. “Good luck with your…you know, with the potential little one. For what it’s worth, I think you’d make a great mother.”

Clarke fought the urge to shift uncomfortably. It was taken as a natural fact that Omegas had a knack for childcare – it was just what they were. Mothers and fathers, teachers, nurses, caretakers, people who provided and cared for others because it was coded into their very being.

What bothered Clarke, however, was that she knew the compliment wasn’t based on her status as an Omega, but on the person Monroe – all of the 100 – had come to see and respect her as.

If she was honest with herself, Clarke had never considered herself the child-rearing type. It wasn’t a concept she’d spent much thought on, not even when she’d agreed to bear the Commander’s children for Finn’s life.

Lexa had turned everything around on her so quickly and absolutely that Clarke hadn’t stopped to consider what would have happened if she really had gotten pregnant during her first heat.

What would have happened if she’d suddenly had a child of her own to protect and care for.

She may be an Omega, but she had little experience with children. The Ark had kept a tight reign on the population and the only point of contact she’d really had with the kids was when she’d helped out her mother with the sick ones.

Even then, her job mostly involved being nearby so her scent would calm them. The most she’d ever done was give the difficult ones a hug so Abby could treat them.

Clarke wasn’t even sure she wanted children – really wanted them, as opposed to her body telling her to breed – much less whether she would be a good mother to them.

“Thanks,” she said, clearing her throat to disguise the note of discomfort in her tone.

Before she turned to go, she surveyed the people standing guard around them – all of them watchful and efficient – and fixed Monroe with a serious look.

“Things here are good,” she said sincerely. “Bellamy was right to have you keep an eye on things while he’s gone and I’m sorry I doubted you.”

Monroe stared at the tips of her boots for a long moment before shaking her head. “You don’t have to apologize for anything. I was a coward and I left everyone hanging when I should have fought, but I swear I’ll make up for it.”

She sighed, but met Clarke’s eyes steadily. “It’s partly my fault that the others are trapped in that mountain and I’ll do everything I can to get them back safely. I owe them that.”

They exchanged a final firm handshake and Clarke hoped with every fibre of her being that their...
“You look tired,” Abby commented casually as she laid two cold fingers against Clarke’s wrist to take her pulse.

Clarke didn’t answer – even though she did sleep better with Lexa in close proximity, her nightmares still occurred far more often than she would like. She didn’t have to look into a mirror to imagine the dark circles underneath her eyes.

Abby waited a few beats before nodding and squeezing her wrist comfortingly. “Any special reason for that?”

Clarke sighed and pulled her hand away. “I told you, Mom, I’m fine. I’m not hurt.”

Her mother fixed her with a calculating look, one that Clarke knew she’d employed herself on more than one occasion.

“How have you been feeling any back pain or soreness in your breasts? Maybe some nausea?” Abby asked, turning to sort her medical utensils carefully. Clarke was familiar with the tactic – keeping busy with something else so the patient would feel more comfortable talking about what ailed them.

“You know it hasn’t been long enough for me to go into heat again. The chances of me being pregnant are practically nil.”

For more than one reason, although her mother still didn’t know it yet. And Clarke wasn’t sure she wanted to tell her as long as Lexa’s scent hanging around her still fooled her.

Abby pulled her lips back. “A small chance is still a chance, honey. We can’t take any risks with things being as they are – if there’s a chance you’re pregnant, we’ll need to prepare for it.”

“No pain of any sort, no nausea,” Clarke sighed. “No cramping or mood swings. I’m fine, Mom.”

Abby exhaled deeply, shoulders slumping in relief, and pushed a strand of hair behind Clarke’s ear.

“That’s good,” she said with a small smile, cupping Clarke’s cheek tenderly. “It’s always a risk, sleeping with an Alpha – especially someone like the Commander. Just remember the pills I gave you.” Her smile vanished. “Don’t let Lexa force you into anything you don’t want. You don’t have to get pregnant with her pup now, no matter how she tries to convince you.”

Clarke was almost inclined to laugh at her mother’s unfounded worry if it weren’t for Abby’s next words making her jaw snap shut.

“There are ways to have sex without letting her knot you. It won’t be quite as pleasurable for her and you might think you’re obligated to let her have you even when you don’t feel like it, but-

“Mom, please,” Clarke groaned, rubbing a hand across her eyes. “Can we not talk about-

Lexa’s hips quivering, pushing further, harder, husky groaning in her ear, just a little more, just a little-

“Can we not talk about my sex life? It’s not exactly my biggest concern at the moment.”

“Of course,” her mother conceded, the ghost of a chuckle twitching at her lips. “I suppose most Omegas don’t care much for sex outside their heat. Jake was the same way.”
Clarke didn’t want to imagine her parents having sex, especially not when the death of her father was still an open wound, but something about what her mother had said caught her attention.

She’d never thought much about sex while she was on suppressants. It hadn’t interested her and when she had wasted the odd thought on it, it had always been about her heat rather than the weeks in-between.

Now that she thought about it, she’d never noticed any of the Omegas on the Ark behaving the way she behaved around Lexa when they weren’t in heat. They’d never left the room in a hurry because someone’s scent got to be too much, or had taken the initiative with their mate just because they’d felt like it.

In-between heats, none of them had shown signs of excessive arousal - if they’d shown any desire at all.

"So it’s…normal not to be interested in sex, even when not on suppressants?"

What she really wanted to ask was whether it was normal to be constantly horny even outside of heats, but it was much easier to let her mother believe she wasn't interested at all.

When she was a kid - fresh out of her first heat - her father had been the one who had taken her aside to try and tell her what it was like being an Omega. Clarke wished she’d listened closer instead of cringing away at the implications.

She wished he was still here. Then maybe she wouldn't hesitate to ask what was on her mind.

"Oh honey," Abby cooed, squeezing her shoulder reassuringly. "Of course it is. Many Omegas won't have sex outside of their heat and it's nothing to be ashamed of."

A dark, unhappy frown settled over her brow.

"Has the Commander been…overly insistent?"

It was a very nicely-worded way to ask whether Lexa had tried to rape her. Some would say it wasn't an Omega's place to say no, that being an Alpha's mate and the physical enjoyment that came with the act nullified any and all protests.

Omegas craved Alphas, any and all Alphas, and there were a frightening number of people who didn’t care to look further. Clarke had always been grateful that her parents had taught her to not think of her own consent as optional.

“Lexa wouldn’t do that,” Clarke said surely, looking her mother square in the eye to make sure she believed her. “She has been nothing but respectful this whole time.”

She didn’t like the hint of suspicion that was reflected back at her.

“Most Alphas are, as long as they get what they want,” Abby said, expression hardening. "She may not always be so respectful.”

Clarke clenched her teeth as an angry headache began to build behind her eyes. She scowled.

“It’s not your place to judge her,” she reprimanded her mother harshly, sliding from the examination table and crossing her arms in front of her chest. “She doesn’t deserve that.”

Abby flinched back, blinking in surprise at Clarke’s reaction. Her worry came from a good place, as
it always had, but Clarke was tired of her mother making false assumptions about her, about Lexa, about their relationship.

The same way she herself had been making assumptions – was still making assumptions - about Lexa simply because she was an Alpha, Clarke acknowledged silently.

Her problems with her mother had always stemmed from being more alike than they were different.

Abby held up her hands. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you’d feel so protective.”

“It’s not about feeling protective, Mom,” Clarke sighed tiredly. “I’m not saying this because of my hormones or because I feel like I have to as Lexa’s mate.”

“I never said you did,” Abby said, pulling her brows together. “Clarke, you know I trust you to make informed choices, I just…”

“You’re worried that she’s using me and that I can’t see it because my Omega wants her.”

The skin around Abby’s eyes softened. “I’m worried you’re putting your trust in the wrong person. I don’t want you to get disappointed.”

Clarke scoffed, the sound dry and ugly. “I don’t think you’re the right person to tell me about misplaced trust.”

Abby swallowed. “Clarke, that’s not-“

“Fair? No, no, it’s not. But neither are you.”

Her mother twitched, the corners of her mouth lowering into a sad frown.

Clarke wondered whether she ought to apologize. Another question of should and want and ought to, another question she couldn’t answer.

A quiet cough alerted them to someone’s presence. Jackson stuck his head through the tent flap, eyes awkwardly flitting between them.

“Aby, I need your help,” he said softly. “One of the Grounders got himself in pretty bad shape – cuts, bruises, maybe one or two broken bones. I’d do it myself, but he’s an Alpha and I’d rather not risk it.”

Jackson was an Omega, the last one that hadn’t died trying to get down from the Ark. Clarke had met his mate – a kind Beta woman two years his senior - once or twice before she’d been sent to the Skybox, though it was painfully clear from the dark circles around his eyes and the dull sadness in his scent that she hadn’t made it.

The trauma might very well stop his body from going into heat for some time, but grief alone would not stop an Alpha from taking undue interest in him.

“Of course, Jackson, I’ll take over,” Abby said, voice calm and in stark contrast to the stormy expression on her face. She took the packed bag of medical supplies lying on the table and slung it over her shoulder, not quite meeting Clarke’s eyes.

“The pills. Don’t forget them.”

Abby said nothing more as she hurried out of the tent to attend to her patient, giving Jackson’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze as she passed him.
Clarke tipped her head back, closing her eyes.

“She means well.”

Jackson handed Clarke her jacket, rubbing at the back of his neck. His presence was calm and quiet, very different from the restless energy that so often hung around Octavia or Murphy, or even Clarke herself.

Monty had the same kind of gentleness about him, though Clarke still wondered whether that tenderness would come with age.

“I know she does,” she murmured, gingerly slipping into the jacket. “I’m just not sure…”

“If she could ever understand you?” Jackson chuckled and began to tidy up the instruments Abby had left lying around. “Maybe. God knows I don’t understand half the things an Alpha does.”

Clarke had to agree – most of the time, she could barely puzzle out the reasoning behind Lexa’s actions.

“I know it’s not easy…being us,” he continued, the steady movements of his hands and the calming quality of his scent causing Clarke’s shoulders to relax. “Alphas want us, but they don’t understand us. We want them, but don’t always understand why. People assume we are powerless, but blame us when we are weak.”

Jackson looked back at her and for a short moment, Clarke saw her father – sitting on the sofa with him, his arm around her shoulders as he tried to explain how people would judge her simply for being who she was, how she would have to be twice as tough and twice as assertive to be taken seriously, how she should never underestimate her own strength – and it made her eyes burn.

“I don’t know what it’s like to be in your situation, but I do know what it’s like to be an Omega. If you ever need to talk to someone and don’t want that person to be your mother…”

“Thank you, Jackson,” Clarke said sincerely, giving him a small smile. “I’ll think about it.”

He returned the gesture with a nod and didn’t push further as Clarke strode past him out of the warmth of the tent.

The camp was still noticeably quieter than it should be. Clarke took a whiff, but couldn’t make out the scent she was searching for – Lexa was still gone, along with most of her warriors.

The other Grounders were ones she hadn’t seen before, or at least couldn’t remember seeing. A single familiar face was among them and Clarke approached them carefully.

“Maria,” she greeted, unconsciously stretching her neck so the mark on her throat was clearly visible. She shook her head and pulled her chin back down as soon as she’d noticed the senseless action. “I’m glad you’ve arrived safely.”

The dark-skinned Beta nodded politely. “We took off as soon as we realized the Commander had gone on ahead.”

Clarke wasn’t sure whether to be amused or touched at the realization that Lexa in her rut-addled haste hadn’t even stopped to tell the rest of the village before riding off to meet Clarke’s group.

“I’ll take you to meet our engineers right now, if you feel up to it,” she offered, gesturing towards the
Ark. “I was on my way there anyway.”

Maria blinked, seemingly surprised, though Clarke couldn’t quite tell why. “Of course. I assumed you would- nevermind. It is good to see you prioritize your people.”

Clarke frowned in confusion, but led Maria silently towards the large metal structure and through the door, carefully navigating the corridors – what few were left and usable – towards Engineering.

“Many of us were hesitant when we heard about your union to the Commander,” the Beta said as they walked the length of the second identical corridor. “And I cannot claim to understand her decision, even now.”

Clarke threw her a glance, apprehensive at the line of conversation. Most of Lexa’s warriors were showing her a lot more respect after the events at the War Council, but she couldn’t gauge the opinion of the rest of her people so easily.

Even if she wasn’t directly responsible for what happened in TonDC (though perhaps indirectly, if she had just made different decisions, had gotten there a little sooner-), she was the one who had denied them their revenge, the one who had taken away the pleasure of seeing Finn suffer the same fate as their friends and family.

“The Commander and I have made this decision because it benefits all of us,” Clarke answered dispassionately, not elaborating further. It was not their duty to report the reasons for their actions beyond the necessary – it was up to them to carry the responsibility, not make excuses.

“The truth of that remains to be seen,” the Beta said, though Clarke did not get the feeling it was meant to be a provocation. “The Commander is softer now, more human, and it is good to know there is more to her than meets the eye, but anyone can see that it makes her more vulnerable, too.”

Clarke tried and failed to remember the numerous bruises and injuries Lexa had suffered in the short time they’d been married.

“You’ve thought about this a lot,” she commented. “For someone whose specialty is crop-growing.”

Maria inclined her head and smiled, a small spark lighting up her dark eyes. “I was trained as a warrior. I only switched to farming when I realized that fighting was not for me, though I hold great admiration for what the Commander has been trying to do. She is level-headed and composed, far more so than her predecessor, at least from what I heard. I would have loved to have the opportunity to train with her.”

It explained her grasp of the English language, Clarke acknowledged. It also explained why she seemed enamoured with Lexa – she knew what it was like to fight for her people, but could appreciate Lexa’s level-headed approach to battle rather than mistrust her for not following in her predecessor’s more violent footsteps.

Clarke shook her head. Or maybe her own shaky pride made her imagine things that weren’t there and served as nothing more than an unwelcome distraction.

She stopped at the end of the corridor, next to the faded and worn-down plate proclaiming Engineering to be just ahead.

“This is it. Raven is our most capable Mechanic and Sinclair is our lead Engineer. They are the people you’ll want to talk to.”

The metal door hissed open and Clarke felt rather than saw Maria stiffen behind her. The reason
became readily apparent when three heads swiveled towards her, among them one face Clarke knew very well was the last one the Grounder would want to see.

Finn.

“You,” the Beta hissed, stepping forward and clenching her fists. “Why are you here?”

Finn flinched, standing up abruptly. “I-"

“You did not even punish him. We were forced to give up our right to justice, and you do not deem our lives worthy of even a proper punishment?”

Raven scowled and slid in front of Finn. “Your people do more than enough damage.” She gestured to the ugly swollen bruises littering his face. New ones had appeared since yesterday, along with a crusted-over cut on his chin. “We don’t have to punish him when you’re doing it for us.”

Finn’s shoulders slumped as he reached for her. “Raven, don’t-“

“No, Finn! They keep using you as their punching bag and no one even thinks of stepping in. It’s not right-“

“Raven, stop.”

His hoarse plea silenced Raven and he walked past her gingerly, stopping next to Maria for a short moment.

“You’re right,” he said. “I deserve much worse.”

The brutal, resounding slap made Clarke wince and look away instinctively. Finn didn’t defend himself, didn’t acknowledge the blood dripping from the re-opened wound on his chin.

“I’m sorry,” he said instead, nodding and continuing on his way out of the room.

Before he could disappear (and she wondered how long it would be before he really, truly disappeared), Clarke reached out to touch her fingers against the clammy skin of his arm.

He smiled weakly and for once his eyes didn’t hold any of the usual questions – no plea for forgiveness, or love – just the sad realization that he was still lost, still caught in a part of himself he didn’t recognize, still unsure whether he could ever regain what he’d given up.

The door closed behind him and the heavy atmosphere in the room lifted, though not enough to dispel the dark scowl on Raven’s face.

“I suppose there’s a reason you’ve brought her along?” she asked, crossing her arms in front of her chest as she jerked her head towards the Grounder.

Maria mirrored the gesture, the impression of farm girl replaced almost entirely by the warrior she’d been trained as.

Clarke frowned, not willing to give the aggression in the room a chance to develop. She had enough of dominance struggles without Betas joining the fray.

“Maria is a farmer from TonDC. If we can build a greenhouse, she’ll help us get through the winter,” she said pointedly, willing Raven to look past her protectiveness of Finn long enough to think of their people’s survival.
Raven’s jaw worked, but her frame lost some of its tension. She pointed over her shoulder at the remaining Beta milling about the room, the one who had wisely kept himself out of the argument. Clarke thought she remembered him from the Ark, but couldn’t be sure.

“Wick can build one.” She looked over her shoulder. “Can’t you?”

Wick huffed, laying a hand against his chest as if offended by the question. “Can I build a greenhouse? Please, I could build a rocket out of a piece of gum and a paperclip.”

“That wasn’t the question, asshole. Can you build a greenhouse or not?”

He scratched the scraggly beard on his chin contemplatively and shrugged. “A simple greenhouse? Sure. The kind we’d need to grow enough to feed us all through an entire winter without depleting our water supplies? Maybe, if we can salvage the right parts.”

He sounded hesitant, but it was good enough for Clarke. She turned to Maria, aware that the friendly behaviour she’d displayed until now might very well not return.

“Are you still willing to help us?”

The Grounder seemed to contemplate the question for a long moment, glancing at them all in turn, before she jerked her head in agreement.

“I told the Commander I would assist you and I will not break my word.” She regarded Clarke with a coolness that hadn’t been present before. “But I will not stand for that man’s presence near my people. Keep him away from me or he will die just like my father and sister.”

The tension was broken when Wick cleared his throat, slinging a bag over his shoulder. “We should probably take a look at possible locations before sundown,” he changed the topic, waiting next to the door. “Maria, was it? How about you tell me what exactly we’ll need while we stake out the camp?”

The Grounder joined him without protest, though her strained ‘Komheda’ before she and Wick left the room did not give Clarke great confidence in the resolution of this matter. She hoped Finn had the good sense to lay low for the rest of the day.

Raven sighed heavily, letting the piece of machinery she’d been working on fall onto the table with a hefty clang.

“Well, that fucking sucked.”

She looked at Clarke with a shake of her head, the dark, sullen bruises underneath her eyes just as pronounced as they were on all of them. “If you’re here to ask me whether Bellamy has called in – no, he hasn’t. It’s just static.”

The worry Clarke had been ignoring since she’d sent Bellamy and Lincoln to the mountain resurfaced with a vengeance. Bellamy hadn’t contacted them and Lincoln wasn’t back yet, either, none of Lexa’s scouts had mentioned seeing them – for all they knew, they could both lie dead in the dirt, invisible and forgotten until their bones crumbled into dust.

“Are you sure?” she asked sharply, peering at the stubbornly silent radio on the table. “Maybe it’s not calibrated correctly.”

An annoyed vein pulsed in Raven’s forehead. “This is me you’re talking to here. If I can keep the Ark from caving in on itself, I think I can calibrate a damn radio.”
“He should have reported back by now, Raven.”

“But he hasn’t.” Clarke took a startled step back at the anger in her tone. “And if you cared about something other than your assets in this fucking war, maybe you’d have other concerns than the things you can’t change.”

Raven cursed when her hasty fingers caught painfully against a sharp metal edge and gave the piece of machinery a frustrated push.

“Shit,” she grumbled, laying both of her palms flat on the table and letting her head hang low.

Silence descended over the room and Clarke wasn’t sure how she was supposed to respond. She cared about Bellamy and Lincoln because they were her friends, because they all fought for each other.

At the same time, she couldn’t deny that they were assets. She had sent them into the Mountain because she knew it could give them an advantage, that risking their lives was a price she was willing to pay if it meant victory in the end.

Sacrifice the few to save the many.

“I care about them,” she finally said. “I care about all of them, all of us. And I hate knowing that their safety is out of my hands now.”

Raven breathed in deeply, her shoulders slumping. “I know. I know you do.” She ran a hand over her face. “And I can’t blame you for being worried, but there’s nothing we can do for Bellamy right now.”

Something remained unspoken.

“And?” Clarke prompted.

Raven leaned back against the table, looking down at where Finn had sat just minutes before. “What you could be doing is make sure the Grounders don’t kill Finn after all. Not a day goes by without someone giving him another black eye or a cracked rib and he won’t even defend himself.”

Clarke shook the memory of his sunken, bruised eyes, of the sadness radiating from his stiff frame. She didn’t know whether he’d be able to live with himself if the Grounders stopped taking their rage out on him. The pain of a broken body was nothing in comparison to the guilt straining against the jagged seams of your mind, pushing you further and further away from who you used to be.

“What exactly do you want me to do, Raven?” she asked, tiredly rubbing at the bridge of her nose. “I can’t make them stop, they won’t listen to me.”

And however twisted it may be, Finn welcomed the violence against him.

“You’re their Commander’s wife. Her mate. They’d listen to her.”

“Finn killed eighteen of her people. She spared him once in exchange for me, what makes you think she’d alienate them further for his sake?”

She couldn’t tell her that he had rejected that offer himself. It wasn’t her place.

Raven started pacing. “Exactly. She wanted you enough to spare him once, so if you just ask her or—”
“Offer her something?” Clarke asked incredulously. “What, you want me to offer her some special services so she’ll consider ordering her warriors to stand back?”

She suppressed the mental image of herself kneeling in front of Lexa, one hand keeping her trembling hips still and the other working open the clasp of her belt, long fingers sliding into her hair and pulling her closer-

“Of course not.” Raven stopped short. “I’m not telling you to suck her dick or whore yourself out, but you’re here, unharmed and not kept on a leash even though you’re probably carrying her pup by now, so you have to have some influence over her. To be honest, most of us expected you to be absolutely miserable when you came back.”

It was a safe assumption to make, considering the circumstances of her marriage, although the mention of her assumed pregnancy made her wince.

“I’m sorry, Raven, but even if I get along with Lexa, that’s something I can’t ask of her. If it was the other way around, if it had been Lincoln killing elders and children--”

“I know,” Raven sighed, rubbing her eyes with the heels of her hands. “I suppose I should be grateful he’s still here at all. You’ve already done more than enough for him.”

She raised her head and eyed Clarke hesitantly, wearily.

“You know, Jaha is gone - went off to find some strange city no one can be sure even exists. He asked Finn to come with him, offered him a new start away from all this crap, but he flat-out refused.”

Clarke shifted on her feet, a part of her dreading what came next.

“He’s not going to stop waiting for you, Clarke,” Raven said, but it was without malice, without the underlying sense of hurt that had tainted their conversations about Finn for so long. “And you’re going to have to make a decision. Soon.”

Lexa was already fast asleep by the time Clarke shuffled into their room, her body tucked awkardly into the furthest corner of the bed – although Clarke was gratified to see that she hadn’t used the opportunity to go back to the floor.

With a heavy sigh, Clarke slipped beneath the covers next to the Alpha. A slight scent of sweat hung in the air, mostly drowned out by the smell of soap, and Clarke realized that she hadn’t had the opportunity to ask about Lexa’s whereabouts that day.

Raven’s words – Monroe’s words, her mother’s words – weighted heavily on her mind, the conversations repeating themselves non-stop in front of her inner eye.

She wanted to ask Lexa for her opinion, ask if she ever felt that nagging fear that the people she loved would one day fade and blur into mere pawns – assets – to be used in a desperate chase for survival.

They hadn’t really had the opportunity to have a proper talk the day before and Clarke had a hundred thoughts whirling around in her head that had nowhere to go. She couldn’t exactly come out and ask what she was supposed to do about Finn or her mother, but even a discussion about the same battle strategies Lexa had explained a hundred times before would help.

The Commander lay completely still, her chest moving softly in time with her breaths, and so Clarke
merely turned on her side to face Lexa’s back.

She curled in on herself until her nose almost brushed against the fabric of the Alpha’s shirt and closed her eyes, listening to the assorted noises in her head slowly but surely fading away.

She didn’t notice the mattress shifting, didn’t notice Lexa carefully climbing out of bed so as not to wake her and tip-toing out of the room.

Clarke frowned in her sleep, rolling over and pulling the covers closer to her chest.

Chapter End Notes

Don't worry, we'll back to our regular schedule of Clarke and Lexa thirsting after each other by the next chapter. :)
“Kane.”

Clarke hastened her steps to catch up to him before he could disappear into the Ark. She yawned, covering her mouth before Kane could ask her about it. She hadn’t slept well last night.

“Clarke,” he greeted her jovially, patiently waiting for her to reach his side. “Or do you prefer ‘Komheda’? That is what the Grounders have been calling you, right?”

Clarke shook her head. “They have, but it’s just to show that they recognize my status as Lexa’s wife.”

Kane smiled and it was a side of him that had only emerged recently, one Clarke hadn’t been familiar with. She’d known him for a long time, albeit not in the way she’d known Jaha or Jackson. He and her mother had always been at each other’s throats and most of the time, her descriptions of him had been less than flattering.

He was different now, optimistic and hopeful in a way barely any of them were – not anymore. At the very least, it was a breath of fresh air.

“Don’t underestimate them. I suspect that if they saw you as unworthy of the title, they wouldn’t bother using it.”

Kane turned on his heel and made his way towards the wall, gesturing for her to join him. As Clarke
fell in step beside him, carefully keeping herself in a position where the cold breeze would dispel his scent rather than waft it towards her, she subtly studied the Arkers milling about.

They’d settled down somewhat since they day she’d arrived. Where they’d watched her warily for the first few days, they seemed to have gotten used to having her back – or at the very least had realized they had bigger things to worry about than who Clarke belonged to.

She suspected a part of their new-found acceptance stemmed from the fact that Lexa had kept herself largely in the background until now, if she was present at all. Although their quarters were here, Lexa barely spent any time inside Camp Jaha as far as Clarke could see. It hadn’t been just yesterday – there had been no sign of Lexa anywhere since last night.

“I didn’t have the opportunity to ask before,” Kane began, clasping his hands behind his back. “How are things with you and the Commander? We’ve seen you in TonDC, of course, but it’s hard to judge something like this from a distance.”

He inclined his head. “Oh, but don’t feel obligated to answer. You have a right to your privacy, even if some people here might feel differently.”

Clarke regarded him critically. She didn’t know what had made him change from the ruthless Alpha vying for control to who he was now – whether the Ground had happened to him as it had happened to them all or if the Ark had demanded tribute long before that – but she didn’t feel the same kind of judgement from him that she felt from her mother or her friends, no well-meaning doubts or outright suspicion.

For all she could tell, his question and the sentiment behind it was genuine.

“It’s better than I would have expected,” she admitted, watching as the guards straightened as soon as they drew near. “A lot better. She doesn’t try to control or use me.”

Clarke thought back to the kiss, to the numerous times she could have put a stop to Lexa’s rut-born behaviour and had chosen not to out of her own selfish need, and clenched her hands uncomfortably.

Kane nodded, seemingly not surprised by the admission.

“I was hoping she would prove to be as considerate as I thought she would be.” He glanced at her from the corners of his eyes. “I wouldn’t have endorsed your plan if I’d thought she’d hurt you. I’m glad to see you’re such a good match.”

The corners of Clarke’s mouth twitched up awkwardly. “My mother doesn’t seem to think so.”

“She’ll come around,” he decided confidently, climbing the short steps to stand atop the wall. Clarke came to a stop next to him, letting her eyes wander over the landscape. It looked peaceful and serene, the Grounder tents dotting the landscape appearing as natural as though they belonged there, and Clarke allowed herself a short moment to see Earth with new eyes, untainted by the death and pain they had all suffered.

Not even the the occasional shout from beyond the tents could break that peace.

“It’s good to take a moment to appreciate where we are now, sometimes,” Kane commented quietly. “A few months ago, a few weeks ago, we never could have imagined seeing Earth. Walking on the ground. Smelling the air.”

Clarke breathed out, memories of a lake and Lexa’s words flashing in her mind. “There are good things left in this world,” she mumbled absent-mindedly. “Time will not stop and wounds will heal.”
Kane watched her silently for a moment before turning back to the view with a lop-sided smile. “That’s a beautiful sentiment, though you probably had a different topic in mind you wanted to talk about.”

“Yes,” Clarke said and turned to face him. “The Grounders. You said they’ve been helping with the food, but...how are we really getting along? It can’t have been that easy.” She indicated the camp with a jerk of her head. “And I noticed that the Grounders mostly keep to their own camp.”

The frown that appeared on Kane’s face was troubled. “There has been some…tension. Indra has done a remarkable job of keeping her people in check, but not all things can be solved as easily as that.”

“Finn.”

He nodded. “Among other things. The Grounders don’t trust us yet and even though we haven’t had the same experiences with them as you had, our people remember that the Commander has wanted to kill us not so long ago.”

A hand came up to rub over the stubble on his chin.

“But things could be a lot worse. Octavia’s new role as the Chief’s Second is acting as a bridge – it proves that we can work together if we want to. And seeing you come back free and unharmed has put a lot of minds more at ease with the concept of merging our people.”

Clarke was glad to hear that her plan had not been in vain, at least, though she couldn’t help but wonder whether it would ultimately be enough to keep things on track once Lexa and her seperated.

“They’ll need to get used to each other,” she pondered with a frown. “The faster it happens, the smaller the chance of one wrong word making all our plans crumble.”

Kane gave her shoulder a reassuring pat. “Give them time. There has been a lot of change for all of us lately.” He hummed in the back of his throat. “There is something I’ve been wanting to propose to you and the Commander, however. I know it’s not exactly an ideal time, but our people here have not gotten a chance to celebrate your wedding. It might go a long way to show the Grounders we’re happy to have them here.”

He was right – now wasn’t the time for a celebration, not until their people were no longer suffering and dying in that Mountain. Not until they had a reason to celebrate.

“And our people could use a break, even if it’s just for one night,” he added pointedly.

Clarke contemplated the suggestion carefully. Everyone in this camp was exhausted and nearly bent beyond their breaking point, that was all too easy to see. A celebration was bound to lift their spirits and it posed a good opportunity for her and Lexa to be seen interacting peacefully.

Ultimately, it might bring their people closer or end in disaster.

“Allright.” Clarke nodded sharply. “If you can get our people to agree, I’ll make sure Lexa talks to the Grounders.”

Kane grinned. “I’ll get someone to make the preparations at once.”

“One more thing,” Clarke said with a glance towards the Ark. “The prisoner Octavia brought in. I want to see him.”
He hesitated, most likely remembering that Abby would not be happy with having Clarke near him.

“We gave him some of our blood and he’s fully healed now,” he eventually answered. “But he hasn’t woken up yet.”

“I want to talk to him as soon as he has. No matter what my mother says.”

Kane cleared his throat and opened his mouth to retort, his excuses already echoing in Clarke’s head (Abby is still chancellor, we can handle it, we know what we’re doing), when a panted ‘Clarke!’ made them both whirl around.

Octavia stood at the bottom of the wall, looking up at them darkly. One of her hands covered her neck and Clarke thought she could see the beginnings of a bruise peeking from beneath her fingers.

“You might want to get your Alpha under control,” she grunted, periodically looking back towards the tents. “Before she puts her entire army out of commission.”

Clarke shared a worried glance with Kane before scrambling to follow Octavia towards the sounds of shouting.

Clarke nearly gagged at the thick musk hanging in the air.

Even before she caught sight of them, the charged aggression clogging her sinuses told her everything she needed to know. She remembered that atmosphere, remembered stumbling upon Lexa during the sparring session she’d used to get a hold of her rut, but it couldn’t compare to the accumulated scent of Alpha here.

With Octavia at her side, she hastened past the tents, past apprehensive Betas and Alpha warriors too low in the pecking order to want to get involved, towards the gaggle of Grounders that had gathered to form an imaginary circle.

A curious wave of relief swept through them as soon as they spotted her approaching - even Ryder seemed pleased to see her as he nursed what seemed like a dislocated shoulder.

Clarke hesitated as they drew near, apprehensive in the face of so many Alphas in one spot, even as she realized that most of them sported bruises and limps and wouldn’t pose much of a threat.

Octavia didn’t have the same qualms.

She rushed ahead, shoving and pushing those that wouldn’t move on their own, and Clarke followed the resulting path. Despite the distance, she couldn’t ignore the hot shiver of awareness running up her spine.

Her awareness grew and edged into arousal when she laid eyes on Lexa and suddenly she knew exactly why Maria had been confused at her inactivity the day before, why she’d assumed Clarke would be preoccupied.

The Alpha stood stock-still in the center, the wooden staff in her hands locked in a subtle battle of wills against its twin brother resting in Indra’s grip.

Clarke wasn’t sure just what they’d stumbled upon, but it wasn’t so much sparring as it was a silent argument. Indra appeared calm, resolute, her arms and body devoid of movement as she stared at the Commander.
Lexa was anything but.

Her pulse pounded beneath the skin of her neck, sweat pouring from her temples, the lean muscles in her arms twitching ever-so-often as she panted and tried to hold her own against Indra’s strength. She was barely holding on to her staff and it wasn’t hard to see why.

Her hands and arms, her shoulders, her face, even the slivers of skin visible in the rips of her shirt were peppered with bruises. Some were clearly from today, others had already faded to a muted brown.

Clarke hadn’t seen it the night before, with Lexa curled away from the Ark’s low light, and now she wondered if Lexa had really been asleep or simply passed out. The injuries were numerous, if not serious, but even after getting used to the occasional wound on the Commander after training, this was a whole other level.

She looked like someone had used her as a punching bag.

“She’s been training non-stop since yesterday,” Octavia mumbled helpfully. “Your Mom had to treat three Grounders for broken bones.”

Clarke swallowed and took a step forward.

As if on cue, Lexa raised her head to sniff at the air, growling deeply and beginning to turn her head. Before she could catch her gaze, Indra pushed against her weapon with a scowl and reclaimed the Alpha’s attention.

“Eyes on me, Commander,” the Beta hissed, keeping her head lowered to take the challenge out of her words. “You have to rest.”

Lexa’s back curved. “I do not take orders from you, Indra.”

Their weapons separated as Indra stepped back and straightened decisively, the end of her staff hitting the ground with a dull thud.

“It’s not an order. Just advice.”

Lexa’s grip on her own staff tightened as she bared her teeth and snarled deep in her throat. Clarke shifted uncomfortably, the almost faded teeth marks on her throat throbbing.

She had to end this. Neither Lexa nor the warriors around them were in any state to continue, not unless they wanted to confront the Mountain Men with soldiers who could barely keep themselves on their feet.

“Lexa, she’s right,” Clarke spoke up, taking another step towards her. “This isn’t going to help.”

She knew why Lexa was doing this, could see it in the flush in her neck and cheeks, had been able to tell the moment she’d seen the bruise around Octavia’s neck, and where training had used to help with her rut, it was obviously failing now.

The Commander stiffened. “I’m fine. Don’t concern yourself with me, Clarke.”

Clarke glanced around furtively at the tense faces of those around them, hesitant to tell the Alpha that her worry was more directed at her opponents than at her. Considering the circumstances, Lexa was still rather well-off - unlike many of her warriors.
Heedless of the heated energy licking at the edges of the Alpha’s skin, Clarke walked closer, ever closer, until she was just out of reach. Lexa hadn’t reacted to her approach with anything but a quick jerk of her head, albeit her grip on her weapon had relaxed.

“Clarke…” the Commander growled warningly, her eyes darkening when the sound drew a shiver from her.

Clarke was aware of the curious and expectant stares around her – the warriors who waited to see if her arrival meant reprieve, Indra who was alert and ready to step in again if needed, Octavia who inspected Lexa with a mix of suspicion and muted arousal – and quickly forced herself to disregard her discomfort.

“I’m your mate. Your Omega,” she muttered, stepping forward until the lapels of her jacket nearly brushed against Lexa’s slick skin, and it was deeply manipulative and unfair, no doubt, but she’d deal with that after she’d gotten the Alpha bandaged up. “You’ve got me to take care of that for you.”

Lexa’s eyebrow twitched.

Clarke had never been happy with acting like an obedient Omega, had hated doing it when Lexa had asked her to, but now she looked up at the Alpha through lowered lashes and laid the tips of her fingers against the firm muscles of Lexa’s stomach.

Regardless of attraction, Lexa’s instincts were bound to respond to an unmated Omega so near and submissive.

The Commander’s chest rose and fell sharply when Clarke leaned up and laid her lips against the sensitive shell of her ear.

“Send them away,” she rasped, ignoring how her nipples tightened at the subtle rumble in the back of the Alpha’s throat. “All of them.”

It would be easier to calm her down without a bunch of other Alphas filling the air with their pheromones.

She sensed Lexa raise her hand and dismiss her warriors with an absent-minded flick of her wrist, though she caught sight of Indra giving her a curt nod before turning on her heel to join the others on their way to their tents – or Medical, Clarke assumed.

Clarke remained where she was until the steps and rustling of clothes and armour had faded, breathing in the musky smell of sweat and Alpha and Lexa. With her nose pressed nearly into Lexa’s hair, near the scent glands of the outer ear, the flood of pheromones was even stronger and she found herself reluctant to step away.

The Commander stood still in her almost-embrace. Clarke contemplated drawing this out, playing along for just a few more moments, but the heat brewing in her gut was becoming too insistent to ignore, the wetness between her legs building.

A puff of hot breath brushed over her throat and made the soft hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

“I do mean it, you know,” she whispered huskily and cleared her throat, reluctantly pulling back her head. “You need to rest. You can’t-“

Her words were cut off by a vicious, helpless snarl. The staff clattered to the ground, a hand slid into
her hair to close around the back of her neck and a lean body pressed into hers.

And then Lexa was kissing her.

The softness of her lips contrasted with the harshness of her palm against Clarke’s neck, the solid firmness of her taut form, and Clarke’s knees began to shake.

It wasn’t the same kind of kiss Clarke had initiated before she’d left for Camp Jaha. It didn’t start out innocent and slow.

Lexa pressed against her lips frantically, desperately, pulling Clarke firmly against her at the same time as she opened her mouth and took a hold of Clarke’s bottom lip with her teeth.

An involuntary moan broke past Clarke’s surprise at the sharp-edged sting and she welcomed the tongue licking past her lips and into her mouth on pure instinct, her hand coming to lay flat against the Commander’s stomach before fisting into the fabric of her shirt.

Their teeth caught on each other’s lips, and the taste of copper in her mouth told Clarke that one of them would walk away wounded, though she couldn’t bring herself to care.

Not when Lexa drew away for the shortest of moments to lick the drop of red from her bottom lip and growl in arousal.

She should have expected Lexa not to calm down so easily, and maybe a part of her had. Maybe she’d provoked her entirely on purpose.

Clarke responded to the tongue rubbing across her own – hot and wet and coaxing - by wrapping her arms around Lexa’s waist and pushing back against her. Despite the hurried pace, despite the arousal making the Alpha pant and her cock harden against Clarke’s stomach, her kiss was never too much, never strayed from passionate to sloppy.

And passionate it was. For all that Lexa acted controlled and distanced in her role as Commander, for all of the ice she cultivated around her, she kissed with a fire that burned through Clarke’s veins and settled snuggly at the bottom of her stomach.

There was nothing except the quiet that stretched around them, the little noises in their throats, the rush of blood in Clarke’s ears and the arm tugging her closer.

When their lips parted after long minutes and Clarke sucked in a deep breath, her eyes refused to open just yet. Her tongue darted out to taste what remained of the Alpha. She was given no chance to regret the loss as Lexa groaned – choked and short, helpless in her frustration - and bridged the distance again, catching her lips in another bruising kiss that made Clarke’s heart beat madly against her ribcage.

Clarke was wet, wet enough to make standing still uncomfortable, and with Lexa’s taste on her tongue and her little aroused noises in her ear, she rolled her hips slowly against the Alpha’s.

It didn’t give her the kind of contact she craved, not while they were both standing up, but it caused Lexa to groan into her mouth and kiss her harder.

Clarke couldn’t think. Lexa’s hand wandered down to her ass, cupping her almost unconsciously, squeezing and pulling until their hips were gyrating against each other and Clarke no longer had the sense to pull away or stop what was happening.

Her shaking knees and the pulsing hardness pushing against her only made her want to slide her
hand down, past the waistband of Lexa’s pants and around her stiff length to coax more of the tortured, husky groans out of her.

They were in the middle of a field, in plain view of anyone who thought to look their way, but Clarke wasn’t sure it mattered any longer.

Lexa moved against her hungrily, her cock rock-hard and straining against the confines of her pants, too caught up in her rut and aggression to be entirely in control, and if she was planning on taking and mating Clarke right where they were standing - if she was planning on pushing her down into the soft grass and knotting her, quick and sloppy and rough - then Clarke couldn’t remember a single reason to say no.

Clarke’s fingers slipped easily beneath Lexa’s shirt, seeking out the warm skin and splaying her hands over her back. It was the first time she’d touched the skin beneath the armour – really, consciously touched her – and she marveled at the feel of muscles shifting underneath her palms, at the slight bumps that told of many more scars that Clarke hadn’t seen yet.

She breathed in sharply at a particularly insistent buck of the Alpha’s hips. When one of Lexa’s thighs slipped between her legs, pressing hard against her throbbing wetness, Clarke whimpered and buried her nails into the Commander’s back.

A startled hiss left Lexa’s lips.

It wasn’t a sign of lust, not entirely, and Clarke immediately pulled their lips apart with a gasp.

“I’m sorry, I forgot about your injuries,” she apologized with a frown, covering Lexa’s maltreated back with her hands and rubbing soothing circles over the abused skin. She winced at the indents her nails had left. “Are you alright?”

Lexa grunted, but nodded her head with a grimace. “It’s nothing serious.”

Her ragged breathing began to calm, the rapid movements of her chest slowing underneath Clarke’s palms.

Clarke let out a soft sigh.

They hadn’t moved away from each other and their mixed scents still thickened the air, but the moment of hormone-addled mindlessness was gone.

Nevertheless, Clarke continued her light touches to the soft skin, feeling the Alpha’s frame lose some of its rigid tension – albeit her erection still pressed against Clarke’s hips and belly persistently.

Clarke shifted further into her. It wasn’t an act of arousal, not this time, but an instinct born of being an Omega. Lexa smelled attractive, but she also smelled hurt, and Clarke attempted to do what she had sometimes done for those children on the Ark who’d been too scared to let Abby anywhere near them.

She hugged the Alpha’s stiff frame and let her pheromones do the rest.

Lexa’s shoulders and arms tensed in surprise for the shortest of moments, but Clarke simply turned her head and rested her cheek against her neck, keeping her hold secure but unassuming.

Slowly and bit by bit, Lexa sunk into her, letting out the breath she’d been holding. Her one hand remained at the back of Clarke’s neck, but loosened its tight hold until it rested comfortably above her collar, while the other slid up to splay over the small of her back.
Clarke’s heartbeat and breathing slowed. Her arousal was not gone, but muted now.

Eventually, Lexa’s head fell against her shoulder with a sigh, whisps of the Alpha’s mane of hair tickling Clarke’s nose.

She was obviously exhausted. Her muscles trembled from more than unfulfilled arousal and Clarke wrapped her arms tighter around the Alpha.

It felt surprisingly natural to just stand there embracing. Clarke didn’t feel that tinge of distrust like when her mother hugged her, didn’t feel the panicked relief she usually experienced when she reunited with the friends she’d feared were dead – it was just calm and very warm.

It was nice.

Remembering Lexa’s reluctance when she’d offered her friendship, the weariness in her eyes as she’d talked about Anya, Clarke wondered how long it had been since anyone had given her a simple hug.

Whether any of the people under her command – Anya, even Gustus – had dared to treat her like more than their Commander or if Costia had been the last person to try and offer physical comfort. Clarke didn’t know what would have become of her without the support of her friends and she couldn’t imagine how cold Lexa had had to become to convince herself the weight of the world was best shouldered alone.

“Your rut,” she mumbled into Lexa’s hair. “It’s getting bad, isn’t it?”

Clarke untangled herself slowly to look into the Alpha’s eyes, albeit she kept her hands resting on her waist. “You can’t keep going like this. Working yourself and your warriors to the point of exhaustion is not a solution, Lexa. And if training doesn’t help anymore, then—“

“It does,” Lexa interrupted, the muscles in her jaw fluttering as she stepped back, away from Clarke’s touch. “It will. I just have to—“

“To what? Train until you pass out? That’s idiotic, Lexa, and you know it.”

The Alpha’s voice was terse as she answered. “I’ll deal with it. However I have to.” Her expression softened after a moment. “I’ve been trying to remember what you taught me – about reading and letters. It’s calming. It helps.”

“Then we’ll do more of that,” Clarke decided resolutely. “But no more training. We don’t know how long your rut is going to last, but your body will give up sooner or later.”

Lexa shook her head. “I cannot go without sparring. Not unless I mate.”

Clarke swallowed heavily, eyes darting down to the Commander’s crotch. Her erection wasn’t quite as prominent as before, but it was already growing back to full hardness underneath her gaze.

The offer lay on the tip of her tongue. Mate with me.

But it would be unfair, to goad Lexa into taking her when she might not be what the Alpha wanted at all. When Clarke herself was barely coherent enough to consider all the problems and difficulties that would arise if she decided to throw caution to the wind and listen to what her body was telling her.

“Fine,” she said, crossing her arms in front of her chest. “But you’re not going to fight your warriors.
If you need to exercise, you do it with me.”

Lexa blinked, a startled frown appearing on her forehead. “You are not trained, Clarke.”

“Exactly. You wanted to teach me self-defense, so teach me.”

“I could hurt you.”

Clarke remembered the bruise around Octavia’s neck, imagined the Alpha’s hands closing around her own, and tried to shake the throb of arousal between her legs.

“Then don’t,” she said. “If you’re sure you can keep your rut contained, then that shouldn’t be a problem.”

Sometimes, it was hard to tell whether her presence helped or hindered Lexa’s control. Her scent and pheromones excited her, egged her on, but they could also soothe and calm – even now, the Alpha was noticeably less aggressive with her around.

She supposed not even the Commander’s own body was quite sure which way to swing. Alphas weren’t meant to live closely alongside Omegas and not mate them, certainly not when the Omega in question technically already belonged to them.

Perhaps physical contact was enough to satisfy the Commander’s Alpha for the time being. Perhaps Lexa was right and she’d get through this just fine and Clarke was worrying for nothing.

Or perhaps something was bound to give sooner or later.

“Can you do that?”

Lexa’s jaw flexed and Clarke knew that nobody would blame her for refusing to listen. Clarke was an Omega and Omegas didn’t get to order Alphas around. They were supposedly the ones who needed guidance, protection, who needed to be kept on a leash for their own good.

After long moments of careful deliberation, the Commander took a deep, unhappy breath and nodded. “I can.”

Some of the tension fell from Clarke’s shoulders. She didn’t know what she would have done had Lexa said no – whether she would have had to let her continue running herself ragged or whether she would have had to accept that Lexa would have to mate someone sooner or later. Even if that someone was most likely not her.

Clarke chuckled at the resigned look on the Alpha’s face. “Good. Now come on, I’ll take a look at all those bruises.”

Before she could turn on her heel, a hand caught her arm.

“No, it’s not urgent.” When Clarke caught Lexa’s gaze, there was something almost playful dancing in her eyes. “You said you want to learn how to defend yourself. So learn.”

“You mean right now?”

The Alpha’s body was worn out and battered, but a hint of restless energy remained. And Clarke had told her that she would train with her, except she hadn’t counted on the Commander cashing in on that promise right away.

The ache in her muscles had just faded, too.
“Of course. I won’t exhaust myself further, don’t worry.”

It was Lexa’s turn to hide a small smile as she crossed her arms behind her back and straightened to her full height. The very image of strict, commanding Alpha.

“I think it would be best to start by building up your physical endurance.”

Clarke groaned at the prospect.
So, the moment of truth. And I'm afraid it's one you guys aren't going to like.

After trying and failing to get over what happened or at least to ignore it until this fic is finished I realized...I can't. The hurt is too raw, even months later. I suppose what sealed the deal for me was when there was a simple commercial for the new season on TV and felt myself going back to that dark place I never want to revisit. There's no sense in forcing myself to do something that brings me no joy - hell, something that hurts me. And it's not just that. Ultimately, what drove me to write over 100k for this fic is gone. My love for the characters and the world no longer exists, replaced instead by anger and bitterness. Some of you have said in the comments that by continuing this, I can keep Clexa alive...but you know what? I don't want to.

I don't feel like anything about the show deserves to be kept alive, I don't feel like anyone involved with the show deserves the sweat and blood and tears I put into this. It sounds petty and vindictive, I know, but I can't help it. I don't regret writing this, but I do regret ever allowing myself to get this deep into something I should have known would end badly. (We all should have know, really. One would think we'd learn not to expect happy endings for people like us.)

I want to thank all of you - for commenting, for being encouraging and for understanding how important it is to me to make a clean cut. If anyone understands me, it's you guys - the ones who have been with me all through this clusterfuck. It's not an easy decision for me and even writing this makes me feel like I'm taking all my hard work and throwing it into the trash. I spent so many months writing and editing, devising this elaborate plan for where I want this story to go and it's painful to see it all go down the drain. To know that I won't be able to put any of my plans into action and that the vision I had for this fanfic is never coming true.

If there's one thing I want to make clear it's this: I'm sorry. I'm sorry I'm too sensitive to shit like this and I'm sorry for all of us who held out hope that for once, media wouldn't fuck us over. I'm sorry, but I'm also grateful to each and every one of you.

Without you guys, I never would have gotten as far as I did.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A very quiet moan broke the silence of the tent.

“Clarke,” Lexa said, steadfastly focusing on the pieces of paper in front of her. “You are making noises again.”

Clarke’s eyes narrowed as she dug the fingers of her right hand into her side, hoping to soothe the incessant ache.

“You hurt me.”
“I trained you like you asked me to. Soreness is not an injury.” A small smile twitched at the corners of Lexa’s mouth.

They sat at a small table inside one of the tents outside the Ark. Their room would have been more comfortable, but Clarke was aware that being cooped up together in a heavily enclosed space when they weren’t sleeping would put undue strain on the Alpha’s already shaky control.

She did look calmer, though, Clarke thought with a subtle glance at the relaxed shape of her jaw and the line of concentration between her brows. She also looked tired, her eyes underlined by dark, bruise-like shadows.

There was no way to miss that she was in rut, not with her leg jiggling nervously and her fingers twitching every time Clarke made another noise of discomfort, but she didn’t seem to be in danger of repeating yesterday’s actions.

Clarke’s eyes fell on the pencil held awkwardly in Lexa’s grip as she tried to scrawl various letters onto the piece of paper. They’d been going through the alphabet for most of the morning, interrupted only by a nervous-looking Beta warrior asking whether the Commander would be joining them in their training today.

Lexa’s penmanship was awful and some letters were barely recognizable, but the task had served to set her mind to different things.

It was a distraction that worked well for both of them.

Bellamy still hadn’t called in and Clarke had spent much of last night twisting and turning before she’d fallen asleep, only to startle awake at the crack of dawn and find that Lexa was already gone and her side of the bed cold.

She yawned and stretched, wincing at the pull in her every muscle. “I don’t know how you do this every day.”

It hadn’t been a hard bout of training, Clarke knew that. The Commander had most certainly gone easy on her, but even so Clarke felt like the progress she’d made had come at a very steep price.

If the Grounders were trained that way from such a young age, it was no wonder the Arkers hadn’t stood a chance against them in plain combat.

Lexa glanced up from where she was painstakingly drawing an ‘H’ – or an ‘A’, it was hard to tell. “I’m used to it,” she explained simply. “Anya was very fond of surprise drills.”

“Surprise drills?”

The Alpha shrugged. “She would pull me out of bed in the middle of the night and make me go through a series of exercises. Failing one of them would mean another one stacked on top.”

“That sounds absolutely exhausting,” Clarke stated with a grimace. It wasn’t hard to imagine Anya doing something like this, though the thought of Lexa scrambling to roll out of bed and onto her feet was amusing.

Lexa inclined her head. “I’ve never been a deep sleeper. And she did bring me breakfast afterwards.”

Clarke began to shake her head, but stopped short and grunted when it caused another tremor of pain in her shoulders. The Alpha sighed as the hint of a grimace flickered over her face, the reason for
which Clarke could not decipher.

“Take off your jacket.”

Clarke’s brow twitched upwards, but she followed the request without protest, watching as Lexa got up from her seat and circled around the table to stand behind her.

Her fingers tightened around the fabric in her lap involuntarily when her hair was brushed aside and two warm palms came to rest gently against the back of her neck.

Long fingers settled around the side of her throat, brushing against the pale teeth marks the Commander had left.

“It took me months to stop hurting when I first began my training,” the Alpha admitted. “Just like with riding, it’s a matter of your body adjusting to the strain.”

When her thumbs dug into the nape of Clarke’s neck and rolled in a circular motion, Clarke whimpered and closed her eyes, her head falling forward to present better access.

She felt Lexa’s limbs stiffen, but the Alpha smoothly continued her ministrations.

The fingers worked tirelessly, alternating between pressing against the point of tension at the uppermost section of Clarke’s spine – where her headaches usually started – and massaging the entirety of her neck in soft strokes.

Clarke bit her lip. Her neck wasn’t sore, but the touches did wonders for the heavy tiredness in her limbs and the pounding in her head that never quite seemed to go away and she wasn’t about to tell her to stop.

Despite the shivers running up and down her back every time Lexa’s fingers found a particularly tense spot, Clarke took care to regulate her breathing and her body’s responses as best she could.

There was no sense in destroying the Commander’s calm this morning just because Clarke hadn’t had a chance to masturbate since departing from TonDC and her neck was entirely too sensitive.

Unfortunately, the trouble with her kind was that their bodies didn’t lie. As quiet as she forced herself to be, the sudden spike in pheromones was unmistakable and Lexa cleared her throat before moving her hands down to Clarke’s upper back in a rush.

The new area was only marginally less dangerous.

The Alpha’s hands dug and kneaded in the precise and efficient movements Clarke had come to associate her with and Clarke’s back arched despite the soreness pulling at her muscles.

Physically, they had become a lot closer since the day of their wedding. A shielding hand on her lower back, a touch to Lexa’s shoulder – these were things they had gotten used to doing in order to keep up appearances and were now something Clarke no longer regarded as uncomfortable or awkward.

Until now, however, Clarke had almost always worn her own jacket or one of Lexa’s thick garments, and feeling the Commander’s hands on her now – not adjusting her form or making sure she didn’t drown, but in something like a caress - with just the flimsy fabric of her t-shirt in the way was both strange and pleasant.

“You scraped your knuckles,” Lexa commented, the frown obvious in her tone.
“Hmm? Oh.”

Clarke blinked and reluctantly averted her attention from the skillful hands turning the muscles in her back into putty. She flexed her fingers, having nearly forgotten the red abrasions on her skin.

Lexa had easily evaded her punches yesterday and Clarke may have forgotten to stop her swing before her fist grazed the bark of a tree.

“It doesn’t really hurt,” she mumbled with a sigh and closed her eyes again.

“Nevertheless, you should have your mother take a look at it.”

Clarke frowned in displeasure and wiggled her back in hopes of encouraging the Alpha to continue what she’d been doing.

“A single wrong punch can do a lot of damage to your knuckles.”

“I promise I’ll go to Medical as soon as we’re done here, okay?” Clarke offered, throwing a pointed glance over her shoulder. She’d planned on asking her mother about how long the prisoner would be out for anyway and the Alpha didn’t seem like her rut instincts were willing to let it go.

Lexa took the cue with a reluctant shake of her head and continued her massage. Clarke hissed when the Commander’s fingers came upon a painful knot near the upper edge of her left shoulder blade and hesitated.

“Are you ready?”

Clarke took a deep breath and nodded her agreement. She grunted and tensed as Lexa’s fingers dug into the bunched muscle and pushed, her palms rolling along the painful area and working out the kink.

Only when the knot finally loosened and the Alpha’s touches once again became more pleasure than pain did Clarke allow her torso to slump forward in relief.

“Feeling better?”

Clarke made an affirmative noise in the back of her throat, letting out a long breath and stretching her back languidly.

It was silent for long moments as Lexa worked the coils and twists in her overexerted muscles and Clarke allowed the near permanent furrow in her brows to smooth out and the busy thoughts in her mind to blur.

There was a slight hitch in the Alpha’s movements.

“I should apologize for my actions yesterday.”

Clarke was only half-listening. “You’re making up for it,” she slurred.

“Not the training.” Lexa’s hands slowed. “I kissed you.”

The regretful tone of her voice made Clarke suspect that a simple ‘yes’ as an answer would not suffice. She lifted her head.

“I thought we went over that,” she said with a frown. “It’s fine.”
The Alpha retracted her hands – much to Clarke’s discontent - and began pacing, steps clunky and shoulders tense. She was getting agitated again, though Clarke couldn’t fathom why.

“I told you that I would not be willing to touch Octavia, despite her being an Omega, due to her relationship with Lincoln.”

Clarke raised an eyebrow in confusion. Just why Lexa was suddenly focusing on Octavia of all people she didn’t know, but an inkling of dread was coming to life in her stomach. She’d seen the bruises on Octavia’s neck and had assumed that Lexa had grabbed her during training, thus causing Indra to step in and keep her at bay.

What she hadn’t considered was how far the Commander’s self-control had slipped before Indra had gotten a chance to put a stop to things.

A deep line creased the skin between Clarke’s brows. Lexa wouldn’t.

Would she?

For all Clarke knew, Octavia was far more to the Alpha’s liking than she herself was. For all she knew, if Octavia didn’t belong to Lincoln-

Clarke immediately pushed back against the image of Lexa’s hands closing around Octavia’s neck, the Omega gasping as Lexa took her lips, biting and pulling at exposed skin, the Alpha eager and willing as Octavia fumbled with her belt-

The Omega in her wanted to hiss, but Clarke clamped down on the reaction. It wasn’t her business.

“I remember,” she said wearily, watching Lexa’s rigid form with narrowed eyes. “And?”

Lexa stopped and clasped her hands behind her back, her eyes fixated somewhere above Clarke’s shoulder and her chin raised stubbornly.

“And that applies to you as well.”

Clarke was sure the confusion showed on her face. “What are you talking about?”

“You still honour your attachment to the mur- to the Beta. I may not believe him to be the ideal choice, but it is not my place to judge,” Lexa intoned, dry and clinical, her throat moving in a hard swallow as she inclined her head. Her next words were quieter. “You made it clear you did not want to be kissed when we arrived. I disregarded that.”

Clarke opened her mouth, but no words would come out. She should have realized that just because she couldn’t smell Finn on herself did not mean Lexa hadn’t noticed his scent hanging around her.

The bland smell of a Beta shouldn’t bother the Commander, shouldn’t bother any Alpha, but Lexa refused to meet her eyes and Clarke suddenly wondered if it had been more than just her rut that had caused Lexa’s behaviour to escalate.

Lexa was calmer today, and Clarke hadn’t been near Finn since the day before yesterday. His smell had most certainly faded by now.

“I didn’t want to hurt him,” she reasoned weakly, unsure just why she felt the need to explain herself in the first place and even more uncertain whether telling Lexa that she enjoyed their kisses, enjoyed their physical contact, would be out of line. “He’s-“
She broke off with a grimace. He was already hurting, was what she wanted to say, but Lexa had no reason to feel any sort of pity for him and Clarke didn’t expect her to.

The Alpha shook her head and the barricades behind her eyes had slammed down again. “You don’t need to explain yourself. It’s your choice.”

The sentiment would have made Clarke feel relieved if she’d had a clue as to what her choice was.

Lexa took a deep breath, her arms behind her back tightening until Clarke thought her shoulders might snap from their joints. “I don’t expect you to come back to our quarters every night. He’s a Beta. His scent will pass faster than an Alpha’s, so you are free to do as you wish.”

Clarke blinked, realizing just what Lexa was implying. She got up from her seat with a harsh shake of her head. Before she could deny having any intention of spending her nights with Finn – and she didn’t, didn’t know if she could even if she wanted to – someone knocked against the sturdy support beam just outside the tent, followed by a polite ‘Heda?’

Clarke and Lexa both turned to see Maria stick her head through the tent flap, nodding respectfully. Her glance in Clarke’s direction was noticeably cooler than it had been a few days ago.

“I apologize for the interruption. The Chief said you wanted to see me?”

Lexa dipped her head in a nod. “It’s alright,” she said, pulling back her shoulders. “I have time to talk.”

Clarke’s teeth clenched at the exchange, eyes flitting between the Commander’s indecipherable expression and the pleased glint in the Beta’s eyes. How much had she heard?

Lexa brushed past her. Clarke half-expected a soft touch to her wrist that didn’t come. “Don’t forget about your knuckles.”

They disappeared through the tent flap and Clarke couldn’t hold back the quiet, irked grumble brewing in the back of her throat.

Clarke’s entry into the medical tent was far more brazen than usual.

The knit in her brow hadn’t disappeared since Lexa’s departure, and neither had the uncomfortable realization that she had no idea what Lexa needed to talk to a simple Beta farmer about.

If she wanted to talk at all.

Clarke shook her head with a sigh and pushed up the sleeves of her coat. She could hear her mother moving about in the back and looked around for some disinfectant.

"I just need to clean a few scrapes," she called out softly, just to make sure her mother knew she was here. "I hurt my knuckles during training."

She didn't wait for a confirmation before sorting through the various containers and bottles on the table, looking out for a familiar label.

The curtain that separated the tent into two areas was pulled back behind her just as her fingers came upon the bottle she'd been looking for. "Do you have a clean rag around here somewhere?"

She turned around and stopped short as she came face to face with Finn.
They both froze.

"Oh." Clarke frowned. "Where's my mother?"

He cleared his throat, adjusting the rolls of bandages and tissues in his arms. "Miller's Dad got clipped by a bullet. Your mom and Jackson went to take care of it."

"A bullet? How did that happen?"

Finn shook his head and stepped up next to her, letting the load in his grip tumble onto the table. "I don't know, maybe one of the trainees. I- I haven't really been outside since the day before yesterday."

A part of Clarke had been worried when she hadn't seen him at all since her visit to Engineering. Maria had warned them that she would kill him on sight and Grounders were many things, but prone to empty threats was not one of them.

"Does that mean you took Jackson up on his offer?" she asked, nodding towards the bandages.

Finn jerked his head in confirmation and began to sort through the pile. "Yes. It's nothing official and I'm not sure your mom even knows he's doing it, but I figured I might as well get started now." He cleared his throat. "The Grounders wouldn't let me treat them, but I can at least help tidy up."

His face looked better than it had when she'd last seen him. Keeping away from the Grounders meant they didn't have an opportunity to push him around and it showed in the fading marks on his skin.

When he was done putting things into order, he turned towards her, and Clarke stepped back on instinct. His scent shouldn't have a chance to cling with Abby's and Jackson's smell so present even when they weren't, but Clarke remembered the exhausted slump in Lexa's frame and the fragile balance they had to keep and Finn's feelings would have to take a back-seat to keeping their plan in place.

The tense silence between them stretched.

Eventually, he looked away from her face and down to her hand gripping the bottle of disinfectant.

"You've started training?"

Clarke nodded. "Lexus has been teaching me a bit of self-defense."

She could see the wince in Finn's eyes as soon as she'd spoken the Commander's name, but he didn't mention his worries about her again. "That's good. It's useful."

He reached for one of the clean rags in the pile and hesitantly held out his other hand.

"I'm not a medic yet, but I can take care of those scrapes for you," he said quietly. "If you'll let me."

Clarke hesitated, then handed him the disinfectant and held out her hurt hand.

His grip was different from Lexa's, she noted as he went to work cleaning the shallow wounds. His hand was larger, no callouses from holding a sword or little scars marring his palms, and his grasp on her was tighter, his movements rougher and quicker.

She hissed when he accidentally pressed too hard.
"Sorry," he mumbled, finishing up quickly and wrapping a make-shift bandage around her knuckles. It was a bit too tight.

"It’s fine." She adjusted the bandage to make it more comfortable and rolled her sleeves back down, re-establishing the distance between them. "Things like this take practice."

Their stilted conversation came to an end and Clarke wondered if she should just turn back and leave to look for her mother. It seemed every conversation between her and Finn became more uncomfortable than the last. He was waiting for her to decide on a verdict and she didn’t know what to tell him.

It used to be so easy, talking with him. Fun. It had made their whole situation seem not so bad to be reminded of the little, inconsequential things. Like a shooting star and a wish.

“I know you want to leave,” Finn sighed eventually, shaking the hair out of his eyes. His shoulders slumped. “I’m not going to stop you. But I’ve been here since yesterday and I think there’s something you should know.”

Clarke cocked her head. His tone had changed, from the sad, private timbre he always used when he wanted to talk about them to something that caught her interest. "What is it?"

“I don’t know if the Chancellor was planning to tell you, but the Mountain Man that attacked you on your way here – he woke up this morning. Doesn’t seem like he’s willing to talk, though.”

Clarke glanced back towards the tent’s entrance, wondering if her mother really had planned on keeping her in the dark. Her features hardened, the cogs in her head turning as she contemplated how to proceed.

She flexed her bandaged fingers and hoped that whatever Lexa’s business was with Maria, it was done by now.

“Thanks,” she told Finn hastily, but genuinely, before turning to leave. Her mind was already on different matters, though she didn’t miss the resigned silence she left in her wake.

It took longer than she would have liked, but Clarke's search yielded results as she caught sight of Lexa standing with Kane just outside the gates, pouring over something that looked like a map.

"...perhaps close to a month. Until then, it would be wise to ask Indra for support," is what Clarke heard as she drew near, her steps hasty.

Both Kane and Lexa jerked their heads towards her when they noticed her scent, their words trickling to a halt.

"Lexa," Clarke said, not caring to slow her brisk pace until they were face to face. "I need you."

The Commander blinked and Kane's gaze flickered between them underneath raised eyebrows. He cleared his throat and raised both of his hands.

"We can continue this discussion some other time, Commander. As soon as you're...done."

Kane's look was odd, though Clarke didn't feel inclined to correct what he was most likely assuming. He respected her, but he was also loyal to her mother, and she'd rather not have him be in the way any more than necessary.
Lexa nodded sharply and rolled up the piece of paper in her hands with quick flicks of her wrists, handing it to Kane. She made a small sound of surprise in the back of her throat when Clarke grabbed her wrist to pull her along.

"What happened?" the Alpha asked, quickening her gait to match Clarke's. "You're in a hurry."

Clarke scanned the wall for a sign of her mother once they were inside the camp, but couldn't make out her familiar form.

"The Mountain Man woke up this morning. I want us to get there before my mother can try and keep us away."

Keep her away, Clarke acknowledged silently. Abby's opinion of Lexa may not be the best one, but she probably wouldn't dare bar the Commander of the Grounders from interrogating a prisoner her own people had captured.

"Clarke, slow down."

She ignored the request.

"Clarke."

They jerked to a sudden stop when the Alpha halted, the hand she still had around Lexa's wrist causing Clarke to do the same.

The Commander took one look at the curious glances of those around them and pulled Clarke into a darkened, secluded corner - or as secluded as was possible.

"My mother is going to try and stop me from talking to him if we don't hurry," Clarke hissed, her brow knitting. "I can't afford to slow down."

Lexa's eyes were calm as she fixed her with a stare. "She may try. It won't matter."

"It will. Neither Bellamy nor Lincoln has reported back since I sent them into the mountain. We have no idea if my people or yours are well, if they're even alive, and he may be our only chance to find out what's going on."

Her hands balled into fists.

"My mother thinks she's protecting me, but it won't help. She'll-"

"She'll do what, Clarke?" Lexa asked softly.

"She'll-"

Stop her. Order her to stop if she had to. Use her authority as her responsible Alpha to do what she thought was best.

Except their situation had changed, and drastically so.

Abby was no longer her guardian, wasn't her responsible Alpha anymore - that had changed the moment Clarke had accepted Lexa as her mate.

"There is not a single thing she can do," the Alpha answered for her, steady and assured. "By law, she has no right to tell my mate anything."
No, she didn't. It was Lexa who could do so if she wished, but whatever authority Abby had had over her was gone - and if her mother tried to fight that, she would have to go up against not just Clarke herself, but also the Commander. And by extension, all of the Grounders.

Clarke did not like the thought of being anyone's property, by law or not, but she couldn't deny that there was a certain calm in knowing Lexa was there to back her. She wondered, then, if that was what being an Omega with an Alpha mate was all about. Dependance and control, yes, but also protection and the power to rise above the disadvantages caused by her designation. Companionship.

"She might not care about that," Clarke brought up, biting the inside of her cheek.

Lexa's eyebrow rose in an expression Clarke was hard-pressed to classify as anything but 'haughty'.

"Then you will make her care. I can help, but only if you wish me to."

A small smile twitched at the corners of Clarke's mouth as she shook her head and reached for Lexa's hand to give it a grateful squeeze.

Just as the tips of her fingers made contact, the Alpha's limb jerked back from her touch.

"We should go," Lexa said abruptly and turned as if she hadn't noticed the gesture. "It will not be easy getting him to talk."

A heavy weight settled in Clarke's chest. She'd almost forgotten about their earlier conversation - about Finn and Clarke's attachment to him. Lexa was honourable enough not to behave inappropriately around someone she perceived as taken, not to spread her scent when she didn’t need to, and Clarke should be glad to have that kind of freedom.

She should be glad that Lexa wanted to give her the chance to figure out her feelings for Finn, away from the confusing sensations of her touch and scent.

But the relief didn't come.

Their stroll towards the Ark was slower this time, though no less purposeful.

The sound of the metal door sliding open and then closing behind them with a dull clang sent a shiver down Clarke's spine. The last time she had witnessed an interrogation, it had ended with Finn nearly dying and Lincoln suffering from severe injuries. It had ended up starting a war.

"Don't let him see your uncertainty," Lexa muttered as they crossed the corridor. "Find out his secrets, but protect yours."

Clarke nodded and willed her face to relax, to imitate the mask of neutrality the Alpha had perfected.

It wasn't hard to find their way to the temporary prison cell. Two guards had been stationed around the door and Clarke shook her head. It was a waste of manpower to guard someone who couldn't leave without endangering his own life.

The two Betas stepped to the side and blocked the entrance as Clarke came to a halt in front of them, albeit not without a nervous glance in Lexa's direction.

"We can't let you in. The Chancellor has forbidden anyone without proper authorization from seeing the prisoner at this time."

“Proper authorization?” Clarke asked, raising an eyebrow in disbelief. “He was sent to kill us, I
think that’s authorization enough.”

Before one of them could open their mouth to retort, a throat was cleared behind them and Clarke caught a whiff of her mother’s scent. She turned around wearily.

“You told them not to let me in.”

“I told them not to let anyone in, Clarke,” Abby sighed and walked closer, glancing at Lexa’s quiet presence. “Not until we know what to do with him.”

“We need to talk to him. Find out what he knows, get intel on that mountain.”

They needed to be sure that there weren’t more assassins on their way to catch either her or Lexa in a vulnerable moment.

“We already did. Me, and Kane. So far he hasn’t been willing to talk.” Abby lowered her head, touching a hand to Clarke’s shoulder. “It’s our job, sweetie. There’s nothing you can do here.”

Clarke clenched her teeth and pulled her shoulders back stubbornly. “That is not for you to decide.”

Abby’s eyes narrowed, a snarl building in the back of her throat. “It’s our job, sweetie. There’s nothing you can do here.”

Clarke clenched her teeth and pulled her shoulders back stubbornly. “That is not for you to decide.”

Abby’s eyes narrowed, a snarl building in the back of her throat. She imitated Clarke’s stance, drawing to her full height.

It was a typically Alpha intimidation tactic, but it made Clarke wince nonetheless.

Behind her, Lexa stepped closer. A subtle, warning growl rumbled through her chest. Just like when they’d first arrived at Camp Jaha, the secure proximity gave Clarke a boost of confidence, enough to make her meet her mother’s stare head-on.

“I will go in there to do what I think is right. And you can’t stop me.”

Abby’s eyes widened, glancing in Lexa’s direction almost as though she expected her to step in or put Clarke in her place, but Clarke didn’t have to look to know that the Commander’s expression wouldn’t give away anything her mother could use.

She turned to the Beta guards and jerked her chin to the side. “Get out of my way.”

They blinked, obviously nervous and uncertain who to listen to. They eyed Abby’s no doubt unhappy expression, Lexa’s looming presence and Clarke’s determined stare in turn before exchanging an apprehensive look.

Behind Clarke, her mother hissed as they stepped aside.

“Thank you,” Clarke sighed and strode through the door without another glance at Abby. When she turned her head to confirm that Lexa was following her, she received an almost unnoticeable nod.

The room itself was big, probably large enough to house a few of their people come winter, but the airlock they had turned into a temporary prison cell was cramped. The man that had tried to kill them sat atop one of their medical beds, the skin that wasn’t covered by his fatigues red and blotchy in places, but unmistakably void of the radiation burns he’d suffered.

He just stared at them.

“We thought he might be more forthcoming after we saved his life, but he hasn’t answered any of our questions,” Abby explained wearily from the back of the room, gesturing towards the speaker next to the closed airlock doors. “If you want to try your luck, be my guest.”
Clarke took a deep breath and reached for the switch to flip on the speaker.

“Why have you been sent to kill us?”

She knew he’d heard her and she knew he recognized her and Lexa both – the flicker of a sneer on his face was ample proof of that – but he didn’t answer immediately. When he did, it was hardly the answer Clarke had been looking for.

“Carl Emerson, Mount Weather Security Detail.”

Clarke filed away the name before opening her mouth again to ask the one question she both dreaded and needed to have answered more than any other.

“Are my friends still alive?”

Emerson pursed his lips and stretched his neck almost as though he was bored by her words, by the glare she directed at him. He inspected the Commander at her side with a displeased air about before he opened his mouth again.


Clarke’s fist clenched and she turned off the speaker with a flick of her wrist, turning around so he wouldn’t see the expression on her face. Lexa joined her side silently, waiting for Clarke to speak her mind.

“How do we get him to talk?” Clarke asked with a frustrated sigh, walking to the back of the room where her mother was waiting.

Lexa hesitated and shook her head. “You know about our methods. You know what I would do.”

Abby had heard her words and crossed her arms in front of her chest as they came to a stop in front of her. “We are not going to torture him, Commander.”

Lexa’s spine snapped straight as she stared down at the Doctor coldly. “I was asked for my opinion and I gave it.” She made a conscious effort to loosen her shoulders. “What you do with it is not up to me.”

Clarke looked between them with a furrowed brow. She remembered sitting in the mess hall back on the Ark with Wells by her side and listening to the relationship woes of the people around them, to the complaints of Betas about the struggles between their Alpha mates and Alpha parents. They had laughed at it back then, but now Clarke wondered whether fighting with one’s in-laws was just what Alphas did.

“My mother is right,” Clarke sighed. “Torture doesn’t work.”

It hadn’t worked on Lincoln and it wouldn’t work on Emerson – even if he decided to talk, they couldn’t be sure he wasn’t simply telling them what they wanted to hear.

“It did not work on Lincoln, will not work on any of my people, because we are trained to resist pain. There are ways to break that resistance, but you don’t have the necessary experience to employ them.” Her eyes slid to the Mountain Man. “He has received no such training.”

Clarke remembered Murphy’s broken body after the Grounders were done with him. The swelling wounds, the tremble in his limbs, the all-encompassing terror in his eyes. It was more than physical pain that had caused him to spill everything he knew.
It was something they had tried – and failed – to instill in Lincoln. What had ultimately broken him had been fear for Octavia’s life, fear for someone he had come to care about.

“No.”

“Clarke…”

“No,” Clarke repeated. “Torture has to be our last resort, not the default.”

She stared at Lexa without blinking until the Alpha lowered her eyes and nodded in agreement. Clarke turned towards her mother.

“Did he have any personal artifacts with him? Photos, a wedding ring?” Lexa had once told her that warriors marched into battle for a great many things – including family. Clarke had seen the people in the mountain, the parents with their children, the couples, the groups of friends. There had to be someone or something Emerson cared about and finding out what it was was the surest way to get to him.

“Just what you see here,” Abby answered and pointed to a small collection of items resting on a crate.

Most things Clarke had already seen while they’d been searching for a patch kit – ammo, the pictures of her and Lexa, although the one of the two of them together was noticeably absent – but what caught her attention was the clear, cylindrical tool resting amongst it.

It was the same tool the Mountain Men had used to subdue the Reapers. She pressed the button and winced at the high-pitched noise that filled the room.

Emerson’s face was the very picture of boredom when Clarke spoke to him again, holding up the device in her hand.

“This. How does it work? Why do the Reapers bow to this?”

He cocked his head and leaned back. “Carl Emerson, Mount We-“

“Mount Weather Security Detail, I got it,” Clarke hissed. “Listen here. I know there are innocent people in that mountain. Your friends. Your family. And if you help us, maybe we can end this war without unnecessary bloodshed.”

Emerson rose from the bed slowly and approached the clear door. His blank expression transformed into one of disgust as his eyes settled on Clarke and Lexa standing side by side.

“Unnecessary bloodshed? You are collaborating with the savages.” His eyes slid from the crown of Lexa’s head down her war paint-coated features and crude clothes towards her clunky boots. He grimaced. “And giving yourself to one of those dirty animals to boot – it’s enough to turn my stomach.”

He fixated Clarke again, but his tirade wasn’t over.

“Your little ‘alliance’ here is a joke. You can bend over all you want, the savages will prove to be exactly what we treat them as – filthy beasts best kept in their cages.”

Next to Clarke, Lexa’s face turned to stone. Her back threatened to curve, her lips trembling in an effort not to bare her teeth and snarl at the insults.
Emerson watched the reaction with alert eyes.

Clarke hastily cut the connection before he could provoke the Commander any further.

“Don’t let him get to you,” she muttered out of the corner of her mouth. “You know he’s lying – they wouldn’t bother trying to kill us if they thought we didn’t pose a threat to them.”

The Commander jerked her head, but the angry strain in her neck did not lessen. Clarke wanted to touch her, take her hand and calm her down, but she didn’t dare to - didn’t know if Lexa would evade the gesture again.

After seemingly endless minutes in which all eyes were fixated on the Alpha and what she would do next, Lexa huffed out a shallow breath and turned on her heels without another word to any of them.

The door slid closed behind her hastily retreating back with a quiet, unsatisfying hiss.

Clarke looked down at the device in her hand.

“I’ll get this to Raven. Maybe she can emulate the sound,” she told Abby calmly. “Disabling their army of Reapers would give us a considerable edge.”

Her mother nodded and looked at the door with knitted brows. “Are you going after her?”

Clarke hesitated. She was familiar with Lexa’s methods of avoiding her emotions by now, had learned that a quiet ear was oftentimes more effective in drawing her out than brute force.

But ‘quiet’ was starting to become difficult for them. The aggression Clarke had been able to negate with physical contact, with her scent and her nearness, was rising – and with Finn in the picture, Clarke did not even have that to fall back on.

“I’m not sure I should.”

Chapter End Notes

If you feel a sudden urge to kick my ass, rest assured that I’m already doing that myself. But feel free to vent anyway.

Thank you.

EDIT: I’m sorry for not answering each of you personally, but I wanted to thank all of you for your kind, supportive words. I know you’re disappointed (so am I), but you’re making this a lot easier on me and I’ve been a part of fandoms long enough to know not to take it for granted. Even if there are a few not-so-nice comments, I’m glad to see I can count on you guys to jump to my defense where I would let it slide. So thank you for everything!
A Final Goodbye

Chapter Summary

A summary of how this story would have continued and ended. A final goodbye, if you will.

Chapter Notes

Some people asked me to write a post telling them how MBHFAP would have ended and this is it. It's not a new chapter and I'm sorry if I got anyone's hopes up, but maybe some of you might be interested in this as well. So here, have a summary of where I would have taken this story if I could have and hopefully, it'll help you say goodbye. (It certainly helped me.)

(Note: There are most certainly plot holes. Many details I only fill out later while writing, so my outlines tend to be somewhat full of them.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Here it is, the long-awaited post about what I had planned for this fic before my sensitive little soul got crushed. (And I'm telling you right now, you're gonna hate me for this because we were just about to get to the really good stuff.)

Let's start with the chapters I had sorta outlined. (Might be a bit scrambled because order usually happens only when I start the actual writing process.)

**Chapter 21:**

1st scene - Clarke and Lexa practice self-defense. Clarke beats Lexa and realizes that she's practically dead on her feet. Rapid blinking, sluggish movements, easily distracted. Clarke ends up straddling her hips and finds herself grinding on her until Lexa begs her to let her go.

2nd scene - Clarke visits Raven. Raven asks her why Murphy isn’t with them (‘did he finally get himself killed?’) and Clarke relays that the only thing Murphy might have gotten himself is a husband. Raven is extremely amused at the thought. She mentions in an off-hand comment that she has seen Lexa running around outside a few nights in a row and Clarke realizes that Lexa is not, in fact, spending her nights in bed next to her.

She begins to wonder just who her wife might forego sleep for.

Bellamy calls in and Clarke is utterly relieved to know he’s safe. He tells her about how everyone is doing and about the Mountain’s defenses. Incidentally, he also has a lot to say about Maya and how she ended up saving his life.

3rd scene - Clarke relays the news to Lexa and kisses her on impulse. Lexa flees like hell itself is on her heels, but this time, Clarke follows her. She finds her inside their quarters in the Ark, breathing
ragged and obviously hard. Clarke approaches her and traps her against the wall, almost close enough to touch. She asks if it will be more satisfying for Lexa to touch herself while she can smell her and while Lexa can’t answer that question, Clarke goes ahead anyway.

She tells – orders – Lexa to touch herself and forces herself not to look down while Lexa masturbates, even though she wants nothing more than to take things into her own hands.

Lexa ends up coming into her own hand. Clarke can’t stop herself from licking the cum off her palm and fingers. Lexa wants to run off again, but Clarke forces her to lie down and finally get some sleep.

Chapter 22:

1st scene – Clarke wakes up on top of Lexa. Lexa is still asleep and Clarke is suffering because the Alpha refuses to let go of her more sensitive bits. She only manages to extract herself once Raven comes barging in with the news that Bellamy needs to speak with her.

2nd scene – Bellamy tells Clarke that the Mountain Men have started bleeding their friends. Canon plot comes calling and Clarke sends Emerson away with a warning – while Abby protests, Lexa lets her handle this on her own. (“Aren’t you coming?” “You don’t need me for this, Clarke.”)

3rd scene – The unity celebration Kane has been planning is happening. Clarke does not particularly feel like it, but after the horrible news, she knows their people need to relax. Clarke and Lexa stay close to each other and play the happily married couple to signify the strength of their alliance.

Clarke is very aware of the differences between this celebration and their wedding. It’s easy to stay by Lexa’s side, comforting, and Lexa continuously shows that she trusts her and sees her as her equal-

After initial hesitation, Grounders and Arkers get along fine. Kane and even Monroe end up talking to Lexa and it soothes Clarke to see that other people might start to view her as a person, as a possible friend, rather than just the Commander.

Close to midnight, Finn catches Clarke and begs to talk to her. She agrees, guilty and still unsure about her feelings for him. He takes her into the forest for privacy and kisses her – and Clarke lets him. But she realizes that whatever she felt for him is gone. His kiss holds comfort, but not love.

When he draws away, she lays a hand against his cheek and tells him that she has come to a decision. Whatever they were, it’s over. Finn is hurt and asks if it’s because of Lexa, if it’s because he’s a Beta and can’t give her what an Alpha can. If it’s because she can’t forgive him for becoming a murderer.

She tells him that she can never forget what he’s done, but she will forgive him. It’s not about Lexa or about him being a Beta. They changed. Both of them. Finn is no longer the boy he was and Clarke is no longer the girl that fell in love with him.

Finn is heartbroken, but he accepts it. He lets her go.

When Clarke comes back to the celebration, she can’t find Lexa anywhere. Lexa doesn’t come back to their room that night and Clarke falls asleep wondering if her wife is with Maria.

And these are the chapters I had outlined by scene. Next points will be a little less structured and a whole lot more vague.
The next morning, Clarke finds out that Lexa has ridden out with a couple of her people to explore a crash site her scouts told her about. Clarke is hurt that Lexa left without saying goodbye, without telling her about it, but suppresses it. It’s not her place.

The days go by and Clarke starts getting worried. Lexa should have been back by now. She concentrates on getting her people ready for the coming war and working with the Grounders to make sure they all make it through the winter.

By the time she sees a group of riders on the horizon, Clarke doesn’t feel mad anymore. She’s just relieved when she sees Lexa riding in the front with no injuries to speak of. When she comes closer, she realizes Lexa has a little girl sitting in the saddle in front of her, chatting excitedly about this or that while Lexa nods along somewhat awkwardly.

Turns out the girl is Riley and she’s the only survivor they could find. She seems to think Lexa is the coolest person she’s ever met because she won’t stop asking her about weapons and fighting and why she painted her face and what that weird language she’s speaking is and- (It takes Abby to pry Riley away from her new friend.)

When Lexa slides from her horse, Clarke runs towards her and almost throws her to the ground as she hugs her. She doesn’t care what it looks like or what Lexa might think, she’s just glad she doesn’t have to go through all this alone.

Lexa hugs her back and it’s awkward and stiff and formal, like she doesn’t quite know how to do it.

In the days after her return, Lexa is distant. The warmth Clarke has come to expect from her is absent, though she is still perfectly polite and respectful. Clarke hurts, thinking she might have been too obvious about being attracted to her and that this might be the rejection she’d been afraid of. The fact that Lexa spends a lot of time with Maria doesn’t help.

At the same time, Clarke sees Lexa interacting with Riley. It’s clumsy, but endearing, and Clarke realizes that she wouldn’t mind having children with Lexa. Even if their marriage is one of convenience, she’d feel safe with Lexa as the father of her children. If she could choose freely, Lexa – with her gentle way of treating Riley, even if she doesn’t know much about children – would be the kind of parent Clarke wants her kids to have.

Clarke’s jealousy rises. Maria is working on growing food for the Ark and steadily consults with Lexa about their possibilities and it’s so obvious to Clarke that Maria would not be opposed to an affair. Hell, maybe they’re already having one. (Lexa doesn’t make a secret out of staying away at night anymore.)

Things come to a head one day when Clarke sees Maria touching Lexa’s arm in a manner that is way too familiar. She’s done with Lexa avoiding her and she rushes in, grabs her wife by the crotch and growls at everyone within earshot that this is hers, this is her wife, her mate, and she needs her right now.

Lexa is too stunned to do anything but let Clarke drag her off into the woods.

Clarke doesn’t answer any of her questions, falling to her knees and working open Lexa’s belt. Lexa is still in rut, she tells herself. If she doesn’t want their fake marriage to be found out, she needs to keep Lexa satisfied before she decides to really go to someone else and possibly be caught doing so.

Lexa keeps telling her that it’s not necessary, that she’s in control, but Clarke doesn’t listen to her and sucks her off instead, almost getting her mouth knotted in the process. (Achievement unlocked: Dubiously Consensual Forest Blowjob)

When all is said and done, Clarke justifies herself by saying that Lexa has been seen sneaking around at night, that people are already talking about why Lexa is so cold to her and that she had to make a stand.

Lexa explains that she can’t sleep next to her without losing control and instead used the nights to patrol the grounds. Most importantly, she didn’t want to be in the way. She saw Clarke and Finn kissing and she has no right to stand in the way of that. It’s Clarke’s life. Clarke’s decision.

They eventually talk out the misunderstandings and reach a new level of companionship.
Things go back to the way they were, at least for now.

(Now come the vague parts.)

- Canon plot happens and lots of it. Clarke finds herself growing restless as another week passes. They travel to TonDC, the bomb hits, people die. Murphy is there with Gustus when it happens and is one of the first to curse, shake the ash off his hair, and go help the wounded. When Clarke comes back, it turns out there’s a small boy, orphaned by the attack, clinging to Murphy’s leg. Everyone is too tired to take him away and the boy ends up staying.
- The Grounders and Arkers prepare for war. As if impending doom wasn’t enough, Clarke goes into heat. There is no time for her to make it through this by herself, she knows that, and she’s tired of denying herself what she wants anyway.
- Clarke goes straight to Lexa’s tent, no hesitation. She wants that Alpha and she wants her now. Even now Lexa is reluctant, but unlike the first time they met this way, they understand each other. Clarke is not afraid to tell Lexa that she is aware of the risks, that she might get pregnant, and that she is fine with it. Even as she’s climbing onto her lap and grinding down on her, she’s clear-headed enough to tell her that she wants a child with her. That she’s okay with staying in a marriage with a friend who’s also the sire to her children, even after this whole mess is over.
- It’s the promise of something permanent, of children, that convinces Lexa that Clarke means it and that she won’t be taking advantage of her.
- They have sex and it’s everything Clarke never thought mating could be. Being possessed, being knotted, it always seemed unpleasant to her, but with Lexa it’s a sign of intimacy. It’s rough and desperate, but no less meaningful.
- Before she falls asleep, Lexa murmurs four words in her ear that Clarke can’t understand and will have forgotten in the morning.
- When Clarke wakes up for the first time after her heat, she’s alone and cold. She feels empty without Lexa next to her and the emotional strain from being knotted during her heat still sits deep in her bones.
- She searches for Lexa because she can’t not see her and smell her right now and when she catches sight of her coaching a few of her warriors, she realizes she’s happy, actually happy, for the first time in what seems like years.
- Except when Lexa looks at her, she’s stone. Cold, unmoving. Her eyes are empty, her face is hard and Clarke feels like she doesn’t know this person who is watching her approach like they haven’t shared something incredibly important. Her smile falters.
- Lexa sends her warriors away and Clarke hesitantly tells her she enjoyed their nights together. Lexa won’t have it.
- “Stop lying, Clarke.” “What?”
- With trembling hands, Lexa reaches into her armour and pulls out a small, orange plastic container. It’s the same one Abby gave to Clarke before she got married. The birth control pills. She throws it at Clarke’s feet and the container is empty, the pills all used up.
- Lexa found them lying on the floor underneath Clarke’s clothes when she got up to bring her some water. Clarke lied to her. And for what? Was all of this, all of their talks, all of Clarke’s words and reassurances and touches just so she could make sure Lexa couldn’t break the alliance? Did she try and make her believe she wanted a child just so she could keep Lexa bound to her?
- Lexa is shaking and Clarke tries to tell her that it’s a misunderstanding, that she didn’t even remember having those pills.
- “I will not be made a fool.” Lexa’s voice breaks. “You have your alliance and you have my support. But the moment our people are free, the contract between us ends.”
- (for maximum angst, think about this situation while listening to this.)
- Lexa leaves and Clarke finds herself aching at having lost something she never had in the first
She doesn’t know where those pills went, but she has an idea. Murphy, the little bastard, went into heat, too. It’s what set off hers.

But before she can rip him a new one and force him to explain to Lexa how he managed to fuck up again, Clarke is knocked out. Her protector is gone and she’s vulnerable and the Mountain Men have been waiting.

(Even more vague stuff coming up and I have to admit, I forgot about half of the little details of this particular part)

(POV Switch)

Clarke is gone and both Arkers and Grounders are fucking livid. The Arkers because they took another one of them – and an Omega to boot – and the Grounders because no one messes with their Commander’s mate. It’s a matter of honour, but they have also come to respect her.

Despite the urgency of the situation, Lexa makes sure their plans are as ready as they can be before charging the proverbial castle.

Canon plot happens. Finn goes along with Raven and Wick to take out the generators and they are all captured.

Cage offers Lexa The Deal: Her people can go and she retreats. Except she has promised Clarke that they are ONE community now, has promised exactly that the moment she married her, and no matter how much it hurts that Clarke lied to her and manipulated her, Lexa will not go back on her word.

When that doesn’t work, he threatens to kill Clarke. Lexa refuses.

Their army storms the gates. People die, a lot of them, but they manage to infiltrate the Mountain and, with Bellamy’s and Maya’s help, even find their people. Many are hurt or close to death, Raven is cradling a barely conscious Finn in her arms, but most of them are accounted for. Except for Clarke.

Cage is hidden somewhere in the base and he’s taken Clarke with him.

Raven wants to go look for her, but Lexa forbids it. They are all hurt. Her troops are decimated and there are still too many Mountain Men about with technology far superior to theirs. Risking all of their people for one person isn’t sensible.

Bellamy and Raven don’t understand. “She’s your wife! How can you leave her in the hands of that bastard?!” But Lexa’s mind is made up. With Gustus at her side, Raven and Bellamy know this is a fight they will lose.

Lexa doesn’t look back as she orders her troops to go.

(POV Switch)

Clarke stands next to Cage with her shoulders slumped and watches Lexa retreat. She can’t even blame her for putting her people first. They’re leaders. It’s what they have to do.

(POV Switch)

“You lied to them. Why?” Gustus knows Lexa and he has seen that look on her face too many times to count. She’s going into battle.

Lexa tightens the straps of her armour, checks her blade. “Because they would have insisted on joining me.”

“And why is help such a bad thing?” “Clarke would never forgive me if her friends died.”

Gustus doesn’t mention how Clarke might never forgive Lexa if she got herself killed, either. He says he’ll join her, fight at her side like he has always done, but she stops him.

She doesn’t need his help. She is an Alpha and the Omega she has mated mere days before is in danger. She knows she’ll fall into a blood rage. She knows her enemies will not stand a
chance. She knows she might not come back.

- All she needs from him is a promise. Should she die that night, it’s up to him to make sure Clarke will always be safe. He has no obligation to, but she asks him to serve Clarke as he has served her for so many years, as a loyal bodyguard, adviser and friend.
- They say goodbye for what might be the last time and Gustus watches her as she disappears.

(POV Switch)

- Clarke has been sitting alone in a cell for hours. She doesn’t know what will happen to her and she’s not sure she cares. Her people are safe. Her family is safe and that’s what counts.
- Except suddenly the doors fly open and Lexa is standing there. She’s wild and the epitome of Alpha rage, her arms and clothes are soaked in blood because she tore up the entire damn mountain by herself and the foam dropping from her lips are evidence enough that she’s caught in the rush of death and blood and violence.
- Violence and lust mix as they usually do for Alphas and Clarke can’t get out a single word before Lexa is on her and trying to mount her. And it might have gone well if Lexa hadn’t been too distracted to hear the footsteps or the cocking of a gun.
- Cage has her at gunpoint. His people, people who were his friends, are dead because this animal slaughtered them and he wants her to hurt.
- He tells Clarke to go. He has no need for her, he doesn’t care if she goes out there and dies but he cares that it will hurt Lexa to see her go. He could kill them both and be done with it, but he has bigger plans for Lexa.
- Clarke and Lexa share a look. Lexa nods and Clarke knows what she wants her to do. One of them has to make it. One of them has to lead their people.
- Clarke leaves even though she knows she will never forgive herself for it and it’s the hardest thing she has ever done.
- The last thing she hears is a shot and the sound of a body hitting the ground.

- Her people are waiting for her outside the Mountain. All of them. Because they don’t leave their leaders behind. The Arkers, the Grounders, they’re all waiting for the next order. Her mother, Kane, Raven, Bellamy, Gustus, Murphy, they’re all there. Even Monty and the others have chosen to stay. Monroe is holding up a hurt Harper, Murphy is leaning suspiciously close to Gustus and they’re all waiting. But when the doors fall shut behind Clarke, she knows they won’t open again.
- Their happiness at seeing her is muted and they lead Clarke to Finn. He’s hurt, lost too much bone marrow, and they all know he won’t make it. He took the punishment in Raven’s stead and when Clarke takes his hand, she tells him the only thing she can: She forgives him. He did well.
- Raven hesitates to join them because she feels it isn’t her place, but he just asks to talk to her one last time and Clarke leaves them to say goodbye. He’s sorry. He starts crying because god, he’s so damn sorry for what he did to her, for not being the man she deserved and for not being the friend she should have been.
- “I’m scared, Raven.” He’s almost a child then and she hugs him as he cries. “I don’t want to die. I know I deserve it, I know, but I don’t want to die.”
- Raven tells him stories from their childhood (‘remember that time your mom got so mad about us cutting up the bed sheets to use as ghost costumes?’) until he grows still and cold in her grip and even longer than that until her voice is hoarse from crying and the Arkers come to take him away.
- (if you’re willing to give Finn sympathy, listen to this while thinking of Raven holding him as he dies.)
- Abby tries to comfort Clarke, but she shakes it off. Now is not the time to mourn. She comes
to stand in front of Arkers and Grounders – her people now. And they look up at her and somehow, she has gained their respect because they are utterly quiet and attentive when she delivers her speech.

- The Commander is gone. They suffered heavy losses. But they got their people back and they are strong, they have proven that today. They will keep going and grow and survive because this is their home and they will defend it with all that they have.
- For the first time, Arkers and Grounders cheer as one. Until a new Commander is chosen, Clarke will lead them as Lexa would have done.
- It’s only when everyone has gone that Clarke allows herself to feel. Bellamy asks the question they’re all thinking – what happened to Lexa?
- Clarke breaks down. She clutches her mother like a child as everything that happened begins to seem real. Her heat, mating with Lexa, finally feeling like everything was going to be okay. The pain. The Mountain. The sound of Lexa’s body as it hit the ground. The question whether she could have saved Lexa, whether it’s her fault she’s dead.
- She’s gone and Clarke never got to tell her she loves her.
- But Clarke is a leader and she picks herself up because she has to.
- She will make sure her people survive.

(This is the end of Part 1. What follows are very vague plans for Part 2 and it is utterly incompatible with anything about Season 3. I have taken characters and done my own thing with them.)

(POV: Lexa)

- It’s cold. Dark. Everything is pain and fire and mocking laughter. It echoes in her head, in her chest, it echoes until she can finally make it stop and echoes ever further even as sleep claims her. She thinks she can see blonde hair and blue eyes and smiles.

(POV Switch: Murphy)

- It’s been weeks since the Mountain and Gustus still won’t stop camping in front of it. Clarke has gone off to do her duty and prove to the other clans that she’s a worthy leader – most notably the Azgedakru, who seem intent on questioning her position as the Commander’s mate now that Lexa is gone.
- And she is gone, Clarke told them that. But Gustus won’t believe it and Murphy figures he should probably make sure he doesn’t starve himself to death while waiting for someone who will never come back.
- It’s a miserable situation all in all and he’s tired and his ass is getting cold from sitting on the same damn rock every day and Gustus hasn’t fucked him once since his heat and that is just plain unfair.
- Gustus comes back with a heavily bleeding Emerson in tow and Murphy has never seen him quite so aggressive as right now as he’s punching the dude and questions him about other ways into the mountain. (Murphy thinks it’s kinda hot.)
- Emerson eventually tells them of another entrance down in the tunnels, although it’s less due to the punishment and more because Cage left him for dead when Lexa showed up like the angel of death herself.
- Gustus takes Emmerson with him to the supposedly secret entrance and Murphy comes along because where Gustus goes, he goes. He still owes him, after all.
- Emmerson wasn’t lying. They find their way inside. They even find Lexa.
- It becomes clear that no one knew about Cage keeping her. She’s in a room at the lowest level. Her body is broken, but not quite as broken as Cage’s corpse lying in a pool of dried blood next to her. Whatever he has done, she got him before he could finish the job.
- Gustus carries her to safety like he would carry a bird and Murphy just hopes their luck will finally turn around while he keeps guard over them.
They’re about halfway to the Azgeda Clan when Clarke starts feeling sick. It’s a long journey, one that takes them over the sea, and Clarke wonders why people would ever willingly board a boat. It’s uncomfortable and it keeps swaying enough to make her nauseous.

The friends that came with her are worried. Bellamy came because he’s a good friend, her best, and she knows she’ll need him in the months to come. Monty would never admit it, but he came because being back there reminds him too much of the pain he had to endure. And Maya is there because she wants to make up for her people’s misdeeds and because, now that the Arkers have given her a chance by donating their bone marrow, she can finally see the world in more than just pictures.

Clarke’s sick and even now, months later, Lexa’s death sits like a knife between her ribs. She has a few scraps of papers with her wherever she goes. Scratchy, unreadable letters she found between the things Lexa left, with only one word in them clear as day and obviously practiced until perfection: Clarke. Her name. She still feels a lump in her throat when she thinks of Lexa trying to write her letters. She wishes she knew what they say.

Clarke doesn’t know why everyone keeps giving her strange looks or why they talk about her having to take it easy like she has some kind of terminal illness.

It’s not until she approaches her second month without even a sign of her heat that she gets it. The first time she could have chalked up to stress, but two months in a row doesn’t happen. Not unless Clarke is pregnant.

And she’s not quite sure how she could have just forgotten about that possibility, even in the midst of everything, but it does make her lose her lunch again.

When she wakes up, she has no idea where she is. She’d think she’s dead, but her body hurts too much for that. If she was dead, she’d expect to see almost anyone, but certainly not Murphy.

Murphy tells her to take it easy and gets Gustus because he really doesn’t think he should be the first one anyone sees after waking up.

Lexa isn’t happy that Gustus isn’t with Clarke like she should be, but she allows him to explain. What happened after the Mountain. How Clarke took control of both their people. How protests and skirmishes all over their territories forced Clarke to go and talk to the tribe leaders in order to make a stand. And finally how Lexa was barely alive when they rescued her, injured and malnourished and delirious.

Niko almost couldn’t save her.

When Lexa looks down at herself, she realizes where the pain comes from. One of her arms is missing, taken off once it was clear it was too badly mangled to save it. Gustus looks at her and she knows he’s wondering if she’ll recover enough to ever take back her position as Commander.

It takes months for Lexa to recover mind and body. Her stomach rejects most foods and when she can finally walk and fight, she has to learn to use a sword with her non-dominant hand.

Word travels that the Commander is back from the dead, even though they try to keep it under wraps while she’s still recovering.

Their time to follow Clarke comes when an Azgeda warrior tries to murder her in her sleep – the Ice Queen knows she is still alive and the animosity between their tribes run deep. Lexa wouldn’t put it past her to hurt Clarke.
• The plan is clear. If they want to stand a chance against the Azgedakru and make them surrender peacefully, they’ll need a bigger show of force. They’ll need help. And the Sea Tribe has always been a close ally to Trigedakru.
• The journey is long and Lexa retreats into herself. She doesn’t know what will await her once she sees Clarke again. The hurt still sits deep.
• Gustus and Murphy accompany her and Gustus is good at judging her moods. Murphy not so much, but he learns.
• Murphy and Gustus never talk about it, but Murphy is pretty sure he knows he’s not gonna get rid of him anytime soon.

(POV Switch: Clarke)
• Clarke arrives. No one in her group has heard about the rumours concerning Lexa due to being constantly on the move and the Ice Queen intends to keep it that way.
• Their welcome is not kind. Polite, but frosty underneath it all. Clarke can see the stark differences between Lexa and the Ice Queen. She lacks Lexa’s care and kindness, her eye for the bigger picture.
• She will not let her take Lexa’s position.

(POV Switch: Lexa)
• Gustus and Murphy prove themselves a useful addition after the third attempt on her life. The Ice Queen doesn’t want her to come knocking, that much is clear.
• They arrive at the Sea Tribe and Luna is more than happy to lend her assistance. She won’t just send her warriors, she’ll come with them herself.
• Somewhere along the way, they stumble across Quint. Surprisingly, he has made himself a comfortable life in the wilderness. (Achievement unlocked: Quint the Beaver)
• With Luna’s help, they cross the sea easily and come ever closer to the Ice Queen – and Clarke.
• As they spend time together, Luna shows an interest in developing their relationship further. She kisses Lexa and Lexa knows that even though it might be healthier for her in the long run to stop pining after Clarke, Luna isn’t who she wants. She’s not one to give her heart away on a whim. Her rejection is polite, but sure, and Luna accepts it graciously.

(POV Switch: Clarke)
• Clarke is showing. Her pregnancy becomes impossible to hide and with every day that passes, Clarke feels the pain of Lexa’s loss cut her deeper. Her daughter will grow up without her sire. She’ll never get to know Lexa, never know what kind of person she was. She’ll never have Lexa to show her how to hold a sword or hunt for food, she’ll never have anyone to teach her how to braid her hair like a true warrior.
• Monty assures her that she’s not alone. Lincoln and Octavia will show the little one how to be a Grounder and Clarke will show her how to be an Arker. And he’ll show her how to brew Moonshine when she’s old enough. His words can’t magically make everything okay, but Clarke finds herself laughing anyway.
• During the time they spend with the Azgedakru, Bellamy and Maya grow closer. Clarke suspected it might happen when he first started telling her about Maya in Mt. Weather, but seeing him get tongue-tied around her brings some much-needed levity into her life and she’s grateful that after everything, the people around her are still capable of finding happiness for themselves.
The Ice Queen is strangely persistent when she suggests a deal. If Clarke marries her, she will recognize her as their leader until a new Commander has been chosen. She’ll even accept the pup in her belly as her own.

Clarke should have no grounds to complain. After all, the deal is not so different from the one she had with the Commander, except this time it’s about uniting the Grounders under one banner.

Clarke knows very well that the Ice Queen hopes to subdue her once they are married and take control over the tribes, but she also knows that it will come down to the people’s opinion. And the people adored Lexa, enough to feel a flicker of that admiration for Clarke.

So even though the thought of being with someone makes her sick, Clarke agrees. Lexa is gone and she has nothing left to lose.

The wedding is a somber affair. No one is deluded into thinking this is anything more but a play for power and Bellamy has repeatedly voiced his concerns about Clarke doing this when she is obviously not over Lexa. Still, soon enough Clarke finds herself with another Alpha wife.

She can’t explain to herself why she is so utterly unmoved by her. Even back when Lexa was nothing more than a dangerous stranger to her, her body reacted to the nearness of an Alpha. With the Ice Queen, she feels nothing. Any of the Alphas she has met since then – none of them drew so much as a shiver. Their smell seems bland to her now, unattractive and obnoxious, and where she has chalked it up to her pregnancy before, she is starting to become concerned.

On their wedding night, Clarke feels no desire. She is willing to go through with it, but the scent that should entice her just makes her feel oddly sick. When her ‘wife’ – and she can’t bring herself to think of this woman that way – tries to take off her clothes, she rears back instead with a grimace. Until now, Clarke has still worn Lexa’s coat as a reminder and a source of comfort.

Clarke’s scent is different now, off-putting, and the Ice Queen scoffs when she realizes she will not be having sex with her newly acquired Omega anytime soon. “You’re not just mated. You’re bonded.”

And suddenly, Clarke’s lack of a reaction makes sense. The stabbing pain whenever she thinks of Lexa makes sense. When she slept with Lexa, they didn’t just mate. Their souls bonded. Their chemistry, their very beings changed to become tied together forever.

It’s a bitter realization. She has entered the most sacred union possible for an Alpha and an Omega, the one she never wanted to experience, and it’s even more painful than she could have imagined.

The Ice Queen is not giving up yet. Even soul-bonds can fade over time and when it does, she will take what’s hers.

(POV Switch: Lexa)

She is mere hours away from seeing Clarke again and Lexa does not know what to do. She knows how to solidify her power with the Ice Queen and she knows how to make sure her people will stay loyal, but she cannot fathom what to say to her wife.

Gustus tells her that perhaps it’s time to take a chance. Speak aloud what her feelings might be. She almost died too many times to not take chances and, he says while glancing at Murphy, one never knows where fate might lead.

When Murphy approaches them, Lexa leaves them to talk and to figure out her own words.

(POV Switch: Clarke)

When Clarke sees Lexa, she thinks she’s dreaming. She’s hallucinating. Anything but the hope that Lexa might really be there in front of her. But it’s not just her. Gustus is by her side as faithfully as ever and there’s Murphy complaining about his saddle being too damn hard.
The Ice Queen sneers behind her and that’s when Clarke knows what she’s seeing is real.

- When Lexa dismounts, Clarke just stares.
- When she approaches, Clarke keeps staring.
- And when she’s finally there, real and in front of her, Clarke cries. She looks different, thinner and gaunt and somehow lopsided, one side of her face covered in scar tissue, but her voice is still the same when she says her name and Clarke just wraps her arms around her and squeezes tightly.
- Hell could have rained down above them and still Clarke would have held on to her.
- Lexa explains, haltingly, about what happened after she got captured. The torture, the rescue, the journey here. She talks until her voice gives out and still Clarke holds on to her.
- “I came back, Clarke.” “Not all of you. Your arm-.” “I am back. That is what matters.”
- They only separate when the Ice Queen pulls Clarke away with a pointed clearing of her throat.
- Lexa’s eyes slide up to the hand on Clarke’s shoulder, her nostrils flare at the scent of Alpha all over Clarke, and finally she catches sight of Clarke’s rounded belly.
- Clarke doesn’t have to ask to see the conclusion Lexa is coming to. The Ice Queen gives her no opportunity to respond as she makes sure Lexa knows Clarke is her property now. Her Omega. And if Lexa wants to take her back, it will mean war.
- Lexa doesn’t protest when they are separated.
- That night, Clarke bribes the warriors guarding her and sneaks off to find Lexa. Turns out she didn’t need to. She runs straight into Maya, Bellamy, Monty and Murphy, who have managed to work together long enough to pack supplies for the road.
- “Where are you going?” “Home. And we’re taking you, your baby and the Commander with us.”
- War is brewing anyway and they’ll be damned if they let Clarke wither away to delay it. Meanwhile, Gustus and Luna are busy trying to convince Lexa that it’s not in Clarke’s best interest to stay here and it’s not going well.
- It takes Clarke to persuade her. Because she doesn’t want to stay here, with this woman. She doesn’t want to stay and raise her kid with a woman she doesn’t care for when the father of her daughter is right here.
- Clarke takes Lexa’s hand and lays it on her stomach. Almost as if it’s aware of her second parent’s presence, the pup starts moving and kicking.
- “The pills…” “Murphy took them. I meant it when I said I’d be alright with having your child. And that hasn’t changed.”
- There’s a new fire in Lexa’s eyes when she orders her warriors to pack up and prepare to leave. If the Ice Queen wants her wife and child, she will have to go through all of them to do it.

(Warning: Maximum vagueness ahead.)

- War is imminent. Clarke’s pregnancy progresses nicely, but it’s hard enough being with child in peaceful times, much less when you have a vengeful Alpha hot on your heels.
- Back at Camp Jaha, news of her pregnancy fill the people with new hope. Abby never thought she’d get to be a grandmother.
- Surprisingly, it’s Murphy who turns out to be the best at recognizing Clarke’s pregnancy needs. They’re almost friends, strangely enough, albeit he still tells her she looks like a tub before handing her a cup of herbal tea to calm her stomach.
- During their absence and with the help of the Grounders, the Arkers have turned their camp into something that almost resembles a village. They can grow their own food, they even have running water. Some Grounders have elected to live at the Ark and, naturally, quite a few couples have formed.
- Monroe and Harper have grown close. After Mt. Weather, Monroe took it upon herself to care
for Harper, who has arguably suffered the most during her time in the mountain. It was guilt that drove her to do it, but it was attraction and eventually love that caused her to keep it up long after Harper was healed. Harper never quite got over Jasper calling her ‘low-hanging fruit’ and has taken to carrying that insecurity around like a cloak. Monroe is an Alpha and Alphas want Omegas. Why would she be interested in a plain Beta like Harper? Turns out Monroe doesn’t need a reason. She loves her anyway. (Achievement unlocked: Fuck you Jasper)

- Things go the way they have to: The Ice Queen is at their gates with an army behind her and Clarke’s baby has chosen this as the worst of all possible days to come out. Before throwing herself into the fight, Lexa kneels down at Clarke’s feet and promises her to keep her and the baby safe. Whatever happens, she will make sure they are protected. Clarke reminds her she’d rather Lexa keep herself safe and be alive to watch her daughter grow up.
- Chaos ensues. No one knows who fired the first shot or threw the first knife, but the battle rages. And the baby is coming. Clarke is in pain and of course her mother is unavailable and can’t help, all Clarke has is Murphy and he keeps calling her daughter ‘the little parasite’ as if she’s not already trying not to murder him.
- “Murphy, it’s coming.” “Wha- No! Hold it in! Do I look like a fucking midwife to you?” “Shut up and hold my hand!”
- She thinks it will never be over. The noises of the battle are drowned out by her own screams. At some point Maya is there with a cold cloth and gives her calm instructions she tries her best to follow.
- She doesn’t notice it when the battle outside comes to an end, all she knows is that suddenly Lexa is at her side, bloody but unhurt, and she grasps her hand with the one she has left and holds on as Clarke pushes.
- When a smiling Maya finally hands over the small, wrinky pup – their pup – Clarke thinks she has never seen anything so wonderful. It hiccups and cries until she wraps the little girl in her arms and Clarke swears she can already see her daughter is going to have Lexa’s nose and a dimple in her chin.
- Even Murphy looks slightly charmed.
- But when Lexa scrubs her fingers against her armour and leans down to run her palm over the smattering of dark hair, there are tears in her eyes. Silent tears that say more than words ever could and it feels utterly natural to finally tell her what Clarke has wanted to say all along. She loves her.
- Lexa buries her face in her stomach and her shoulders are shaking and Clarke quietly strokes her hair while their pup is cooing happily.
- Even without the words, Clarke would have known Lexa’s answer. Ai Hod Yu In. The same words she murmured to her on the night they first slept together and Clarke wishes desperately she’d known what the words meant back then.
- The battle is won. There have been casualties. Miller will never make it back home. Kane is still fighting for his life. Every war demands its tributes, and every battle changes them. But there are good things left in this world. Time will not stop and wounds will heal.

Epilogue:

- “And that, kids, is how I met your mother.” “And that’s the tale of how we ended up here.”
- Murphy finishes the story and leans back lazily. The children around him are staring with their mouths wide-open and glittering eyes. He can barely keep track of them. Anya, Clarke and Lexa’s oldest at fifteen. Scrappy kid, takes after her mothers way too much for his comfort. An Omega, but you wouldn’t be able to tell at all with how she orders people around.
- Especially Murphy’s own son. Back when he found the tyke in the rubbles of TonDC, he wasn’t particularly keen on playing Dad. But the little shitstain grew on him. And now he gets to watch his proverbial flesh and blood trail after Clarke’s kid like a love-sick puppy. It’d be
almost cute if it didn’t mean Murphy might actually be related to Clarke sometime soon.

- Then there are the others. Jackie, Clarke and Lexa’s second. Thankfully a lot meeker than her sister. Bellamy and Maya’s son, Augustus, who is the one who always pesters him for new stories. And of course there’s Lincoln and Octavia’s whole brood. Murphy doesn’t even try to remember their names because there are five of them and three of them look exactly the same and they’re all just as annoying as Octavia.

- The children are clamouring for more stories (“Uncle Murphy, tell us another story about Quint the Beaver!”) but Clarke comes out of her listening spot and tells her daughters it’s time for their training. Octavia may like to joke around, but she’s a hardass about teaching the kids to fight.

- The kids disperse and Clarke nods at Murphy. His face barely shows his age, even after all these years. His hair is longer and he finally managed to grow a beard, but he still looks a lot like the slimy lizard that managed to fuck up constantly. Nowadays, the insult is said in good-natured jest.

- Clarke has changed, too. She is older, fuller. Two pregnancies have taken their toll on her, but her eyes are still bright and she can smile freely now.

- “I appreciate you leaving out the more sordid details of that story.” “What, about how you and your wife couldn’t stop eye-fucking each other? Pretty sure they see that every day.”

- A lot between them has changed. Old animosity has withered away to leave friendship and respect. Clarke stares after the children.

- “When we first came to Earth, did you ever think we’d end up here?” “Not for a minute.”

(POV Switch: Clarke)

- Clarke finds Lexa pouring over a map. Still the same sharp intelligence in her eyes, still the same quiet confidence. Her hair may be turning grey at the temples and there’s a perpetual worry line between her brows, but Clarke still sees the same kind, hesitant woman she fell in love with.

- She kisses her and it will never not make her heart beat and her instincts go crazy.

- “What was that for?” “Nothing, I’m just happy.”

- Lexa smiles, one of the big, genuine smiles it took her years to allow herself, and lays her hands on Clarke’s pregnant belly.

- “Did you decide on a name yet?” “I thought you wanted to name her after Gustus.” “We can name her after your mother, too.”

- It doesn’t matter. They both know they will end up having a fourth child anyway.

- When Lexa kneels to speak soft word to her belly, Clarke wonders how her life would have turned out without Lexa by her side. If she could have dealt with the responsibilities of a leader, with the dangers lurking all around them, with her mother’s death.

- Thankfully, she will never have to know.

(POV Switch: Murphy)

- Murphy sits down heavily and leans against the slab of stone behind him. It’s not tradition, but Lexa saw it fitting to erect a monument to honour her closest friend even in death.

- He comes here every day to talk. He tells Gustus about how their son is doing, what Clarke has done to annoy him today, which one of their friends would be the next to give birth. He tells him how much he misses him.

- But they had a few good years, more than Murphy ever thought he’d get, and Gustus died peacefully and surrounded by the people he loved.

- That’s all anyone could ever ask for.

- “We did good, you and I, didn’t we?” He smiles and pats the cold stone. “All of us did.”

Aaaaand that, my friends, would have been the official end of MBHFAP. For the cheesy soundtrack
their happy ending deserves, go here.

Not mentioned in the epilogue, but definitely happening:

- Raven never bothered getting herself a husband and is more than happy with herself. She and Murphy moved in together after Gustus died and now judge people from their porch.
- Jasper ended up moving into the woods with Quint after realizing Bellamy stole his girlfriend.
- Bellamy and Maya are ridiculously sappy and happy and Murphy never stops making fun of them for it.
- Out of all the Commanders, Lexa has lived the longest. And at this rate, she’ll stay Commander forever because her and Clarke are a frighteningly effective team and no one dares to go up against them.
- Harper started training after the battle against the Azgedakru and is now a very skilled warrior. Monroe is incredibly proud of her wife.
- Lincoln and Octavia will probably pop out babies until their bodies give up. Octavia is now one of Lexa’s closest advisors and chief to a village while Lincoln is content being a sort of stay-at-home Dad. Every year, Octavia will light a fire in Indra’s memory and make sure it lives on by telling her children about one of the bravest and most fierce women she has ever met.
- Murphy and Gustus’ son is the most gentle Alpha anyone has ever seen, despite getting raised by Murphy. He’ll end up shyly courting Clarke and Lexa’s oldest, who will promptly hit him over the head, declare him a bloody coward for waiting so long, and then kiss him on the cheek to seal the deal. Clarke and Murphy are horrified at being a family now.
- Quint took his family and moved far far away from Jasper, to a place with many rivers for all his beaver brethren to enjoy.
- Out of all the mothers, Maya is the strictest. Murphy has seen her angry once and he still has nightmares about it. (Bellamy is into it.)
- Margaret the Gorilla lived out a long and happy life in the woods around the newly rebuilt TonDC. The last victim she ate before she died of old age was Emmerson.
- Everyone lives happily ever after. The way it should have been.

Chapter End Notes

And this is it. Now you know.

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