### Autumn Dreaming

**by Nell65**

#### Summary

Taking refuge in the fortress of the Mountain Men, won by at the last desperate moment by Monty, Clarke and Bellamy, gives the people of the Ark the secure base they need to make a place for themselves on the new Earth. It won't be easy. Clarke is gone, winter is upon them and war between the clans is looming. And somewhere to the northeast, Thelonius Jaha and John Murphy are finding clues that could help unravel the mystery of Armageddon, or unravel the present.

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For my very excellent beta reader and friend, Jeanie205. This would not be nearly so well-written without you.

#### Notes

First! This was written in the hiatus between S2 and S3. So it was all speculation about possible futures as I wrote it. Some (or most!) of it will turn out to be - not canon. It will become an alternate reality, branching off from the end of S2.

As a story, it has a little bit of everything, but is mostly driven by my firm conviction that the Arkers should take the fortress at Mt. Weather for themselves. And, it seems from previews that the show runners let them do it! Well, at least they are using the supplies...
from Mt. Weather, though it still seems like it would be easier to move to the supplies than to have to truck them back to Arkadia, but... there you go.) That conviction, in combination with cast interviews, cast pictures, youtube videos, and lots of spoilers for S3 (some of which were later thoroughly shot down, but were already in my story so...) provided the engine and inspiration.

I have no illusions that any of this will actually show up in canon. In fact, my guess is that none of it will except in the most accidental of ways. Especially - I note - my characterization for Roan. I created him, for this story, based entirely on short descriptions that came with the casting announcement and a whole lot of publicity pictures and a few very short clips of the actor in a different role. (And actually? I'm impressed by how much I got right! I guessed he'd be a missing power player from Trikru, not Azgeda... but otherwise, so, far, wow. Read and enjoy.) Duncan, I invented whole-cloth – cut from the half-second moment when Indra gasped (in recognition?) at a downed Reaper in the tunnels below Mt. Weather.

Again, without Jeanie205 – who is a marvel and to whom I will always be grateful for her support in getting this story out into the world! – the story would be much less than it is. Any errors of grammar or fact are my own, as is my interpretation of the material presented in the CW TV series based on Kass Morgan's novel series, *The 100*.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Clarke limped on toward Camp Jaha, moving more easily now that she could see the top of the Ark glinting in the mid-morning sun. She’d lost track of time, a bit, on her walkabout. The deciduous trees had flamed red and gold and then dropped their all their leaves in great drifts, crackling under her boots. The ground was hard now and covered in frost most mornings, but here hadn’t yet been any snow. It was probably something less than three months but more than two since she turned and fled what she’d become.


None of them titles she’d ever wanted. By running away, she’d certainly demonstrated that she was none of them. None but the last, anyhow.

Now she had no idea what titles would great her.


My daughter.

Her mother would welcome her. No matter what. Abby’s love was a rock.

She wondered when her mother’s love had become a burden.

She would be glad to see her, all the same. It had been a long time coming, but she realized that she had some apologies to make. The wound of her father’s death would always be there, never fully healed. But Jake would have hated coming between them. It did not honor his memory to hate her mother for trying to save them all. Even when she failed.

And much as it pained her, she’d come to see that while her mother set in motion the events that led to Jake’s death – Abby had been right and Jake had been wrong. The Ark had been in no condition for the mass panic that would have followed a sudden announcement that they were all doomed.

Keeping it a secret and doing nearly nothing – that had also been a fantastically stupid plan. But simply dropping the information bomb the way Jake wanted to do it would have been just a different kind of disaster.

He thought everyone thought like him. An engineer. Everything was a problem that led to it’s own solution. So he wanted to present the people with the problem because he believed they would come together to solve it, logically, carefully, and with everyone’s best interests in mind.

Clarke’s first months on the ground made it abundantly clear that Jake was wrong. Really, really wrong. That was NOT how everyone thought. It wasn’t even how most people thought. In fact, as a group, people tended not to think at all so much as react emotionally. And then strike out in fear. Panic. Distrust. Blind rage.

The Ark had long been a powder keg of seething resentments and tensions and barely functioning coalitions. Jake’s well meaning, earnest desire to let everyone on it know they were doomed to die a horrible death would have unleashed chaos. It definitely would not have led to the crowd-sourced miracle solution to their dilemma that her father’s hopeful heart had dreamed of.

Not that Jaha and the council’s plan had been any better. If they needed to find out if they could
live on Earth – and they did – then an advance team of guards, engineers, mechanics and agro and earth skills types would have been ideal. A hundred un-prepared teenagers without any supplies was a death sentence by another name and a really crappy experiment at the same time.

But her hands were far too bloody for her to judge others when their own desperate plans exploded in their faces.

She wanted to make peace with her mother. And apologize to the remnants of the 100 for running away. Thinking that their pain was somehow her burden and she was too weak to carry it. To carry them. Thinking that it was unfair of them to expect it of her. That it was time for the grown ups to take over.

So she’d chuck them all over the side of her looming guilt and fled. Not so cool, in hindsight.

She needed, wanted, to apologize to Bellamy in particular. He’d gone through his own hell and back inside the mountain and she’d run away from him too.

She’d claimed she could bear the burden so they didn’t have too. False bravado that choked her now. Their weight – all forty seven of them – had seemed so heavy, on that long trek back to Camp Jaha. Their halting steps. Their bowed shoulders. Their whispered thanks, gazes skittering away before they met her eyes. She’d resented them all. For needing her. For fearing her. For being afraid of what she’d become. It was suffocating her.

She’d felt them all looking at her. Knowing they weren’t seeing a terrified, exhausted, grieving kid like themselves. They were seeing a hero. A savior. A holy killer.

She’d made deals, cut corners, sold more than she had, ransomed herself, pimped herself, burned grounder warriors alive, sacrificed grounder villagers to missiles, cut throats one by one in acts of mercy and penance and finally pulled a switch that irradiated an entire people. Burning them from the inside out instead of the outside in.

All to save what in the end was a paltry forty-seven lives. And they still needed her. Wanted her. Wanted to thank her. To love her. To fear her. It was too much too fast.

Or, that’s what she’d told herself. On that long walk to the fallen Ark.

Later, so much later, she wondered if any of what she’d imagined had been real. They all carried their own weight and their own pain and probably would have told her exactly where and how far to shove it if she’d tried to carry theirs. Octavia had certainly made that clear enough. Clarke had actually been offended and hurt by that. At the time. She’d taken comfort in it since. Hoped the rest had been as angry and impatient with her false grandeur as Octavia Blake had been.

Clark had done the math as best she could. She’d saved her forty-seven lives. The price? It was roughly fifteen to sixteen dead for every one living kid. Probably more if she could figure in contingency deaths. Parents and children deprived of their warrior or farmer or hunter. People who would sicken and die from their wounds at a later time. People who had no home to return too. Maybe twenty dead to one saved. That seemed… a reasonable estimate.

The reluctance of the Ark’s leaders to pay that price seemed less horrifying now. Maybe even more generous, broadly understood. Kane and the rest had always been absolutely clear that the Ark was all about human life. Not any one particular human. The old one versus many. The Ark was dedicated to the many.

Clarke had chosen the few. Each precious one. At any cost.
She’d considered trying to light herself on fire as a kind of atonement. She realized she didn’t have the courage.

She was weak enough to want to live. Even knowing in her heart that she’d do it all over again. She would save the few – her own precious few – at the expense of the many. She would scorch the earth in their name because she loved them. Each individual one. Once she came to terms with that, found a kind of peace in her own refusal to die easily, or let go the ones she chose for herself, she realized she was ready to return to her people.

She figured her zen state of mind would last about a week, if she was very, very lucky, but she was determined to hold on to it as long as she could.

It was almost noon and the crashed Ark nearly filled the sky above her when she stumbled across what was clearly a recently cut, well-used path. It took her a minute to orient herself, but then she remembered that she’d come around from the west. This must be the direct route between Camp Jaha and the drop ship.

She looked again at the ground.


The path wasn’t wide enough for the wagons she’d seen the grounders use, but someone had definitely been pulling some kind of cart along. Interesting.

She was tempted to head for the drop ship, wondering why her people had – or someone had – reclaimed it. But after hesitating a few more minutes, she turned her steps toward Camp Jaha. Best get to get the initial return over with.

The trail met a road.

She knew where she was. This was the before-times roadbed that was one of the most direct routes between the Mountain and Camp Jaha. The path she’d walked along two (three?) months ago, accompanying the broken remnant of the survivors of the 100. Her sacrifice. Her forfeit.

It wasn’t path now.

It was a road again. A graveled road, wide enough for two wagons to pass each other.

Clarke picked up her pace as best she could, her heart suddenly beating hard in her chest and not from exertion.

The trees fell away and she entered the wide, open plain the Ark had fortuitously landed in. A trickster god’s blessing on the desperate and hungry.

Camp Jaha had changed at least as much as the road had. There were a lot more structures inside the fence, structures that didn’t look like they were made from salvage. Or at least, not salvage from the Ark itself. Half-dozen long low buildings with curving metal roofs lined up in orderly rows. Clarke stared at them as she drew closer, something tugging in her memory.

Quonset Huts. From Earth history and survival skills. These were actual, for real Quonset huts. Straight out of the great wars of the twentieth century.

The Quonset huts had chimneys. White smoke spiraled up from several of them, vanishing into the now cloudless sky and she realized she’d been smelling wood smoke for quite a while. There was even what looked like a good forty meters-worth of stacked, cut wood lined up along what more
than ever looked like an open drill ground.

With basketball hoops.

She also noted what looked like an actual game field outside the electric fence on the far side of
the open area around the compound, complete with goal posts for American Football and nets for
regular football.

Looked like the Ark-wide obsession with fantasy sports teams had enthusiastically transitioned to
live play.

And game fields weren’t the only new thing outside the fence. There were also fenced off pastures.
Pastures complete with water tanks and three sided sheds. Those were definitely constructed from
random salvage. A dozen horses grazed in the bright sun. Accompanied by a few cows. Actual
cows. Classic red and white cows from the picture books of her childhood. Clarke laughed as she
gaped in wonder. She couldn’t help it. Cows!

The one thing she wasn’t spotting were her people.

Oh, there were guards patrolling, and a few uniformed individuals moving purposefully about
inside the fence, but the crowds of folk generally milling about doing nothing in particular that she
remembered from those few frantic days after she escaped Mount Weather were gone.

The gates were open today and she knew the gate guards had been watching her approach since
she entered the open area.

They obviously didn’t identify her as an immediate threat, but they kept their hands on their guns
all the same.

She pulled her scarves off all the way, shaking out her hair. She supposed it was possible there
were grounders with hair as light as hers, somewhere, but she hadn’t seen any.

Neither had the guards. She saw them grin and ease their hands away from the triggers, and after a
few brief words, one of them turned and trotted away, heading for the Ark.

When she was close enough she waved and called out, “Hey. I’m Clarke. Clarke Griffin.”

The guard laughed. “Yeah. The hair was the final clue. A lot of folks sure are going to be happy to
see you.”

Clarke was nearly to the gate now. “So, where is everyone?”

The guard’s wide grin faded a bit and a wary look entered her eyes. “I think I’ll let the officer in
charge explain.”

“Why can’t you?”

“Because,” and she shrugged, “I’ll mess it up. Our instructions are pretty clear on this.”

Clarke narrowed her eyes and opened her mouth to argue when she heard the footsteps of other
guard running back. “Ms. Griffin! Ms. Griffin!”

“Yes?”

“This way please!”
Clarke forced herself to settle into the offered chair and repeated, “I’d really like to see my mom.”

The officer in charge had introduced himself as Major Alex Chavez. Clarke had never met him before, didn’t even remember seeing him in her life. But then, until her very short career as a juvenile delinquent, she’d had precious little to do with any of the guard.

His office was on what was now the ground floor of the Ark. It had a big west-facing window that overlooked the football fields and had a panoramic view of the snow-capped mountains that filled the near horizon.

Major Chavez nodded. “I completely understand Ms. Griffin. I do. We’ve radioed in your arrival and your transport will be here shortly. Are you sure you wouldn’t like to visit the cafeteria? You must be hungry.”

“Transport to where?”

“To your mother. In fact, I’m sure she’ll be on it. She’s been very anxious for your return.”

Clarke narrowed her eyes. “To where, Major Chavez. And where are all the people? Where are the rest of The One Hundred?”

He sighed. “I really wish you’d let your mother explain everything.”

“I really wish you’d answer just one of my damn questions.”

Major Chavez’s lips quirked into what Clarke would have sworn was a smile. “They told me you’d be testy. The thing is, Clarke, can I call you Clarke?”

“Sure. Clarke. Go on.”

“Okay. Thing is, you’re really probably not going to like the answer to your question. You might even be tempted to storm out of Camp Jaha and vanish into the forest again. And no one, absolutely no one, wants you to do that.”

“I promise I will not storm out.”

“I have your word?” His expression was bizarrely formal.

“Sure,” Clarke said again, letting her tone and her false smile indicate her impatience with the ritual. “You have my word.”

“Mt. Weather.”

Clarke shook her head. “Excuse me?”

“Mt. Weather. The bulk of our people have relocated to Mt. Weather.”

“What the fuck for?”

“It’s a fortress in the wilderness. It has everything we could need to survive the winter and hold our gains come fighting season next spring.”

“It’s a tomb!”

She realized she was leaning over the Major’s desk and shouting. The Major didn’t flinch.
“This whole world is a tomb. But we are alive and we intend to stay that way.”

Clarke backed up a step and consciously modulated her voice, straining for sensible and calm. “Bellamy. I need to see Bellamy.”

“He’s not here either.”

Clarke spun on her heel to storm out of the room.

The major’s voice stopped her. “You gave me your word.”

Before Clarke could decide what to do next, a junior guard knocked lightly at the doorframe. “Uh, sir?”

“Yes cadet?”

“Transport from Mt. Weather is arriving.”


Clarke wanted to stride angrily, head held high.

Unfortunately even the brief respite of sitting in the Major’s office had allowed her bum knee to stiffen up. So she hobbled. Head held as high as she could.

At the outer door she stopped and stared.

Transport was a group of three enclosed vehicles surrounded by a half dozen small four-wheeled machines, each with a single rider, rifles slung on their backs. She realized these were the vehicles that had made the narrow tracks on the route to the drop ship.

The – what was the word? She dredged her memory. Convoy – yes – the convoy was just now entering the main gate. The three larger – Cars? Jeeps? Utility vehicles? – she’d never really paid attention to the types of cars in the old vids – never expected to see any in her lifetime – were lined up in the middle.

The vehicles pulled up into what she now recognized as a curved drive that swept around the drill space.

A rear door in the second enclosed vehicle popped open almost before the wheels had stopped moving and her mother slid out.

The first flurry of hugs and tears over with, and yes there were tears on both sides, Clarke stepped back. “Mom. I don’t understand.”

“I know. There’s a lot to explain. Come on. We can start on the way back.” Abby turned to Major Chavez. “Thank you for calling as soon as you spotted her.”

“Of course. I know how anxious everyone has been.”

“Back? To Mount Weather? Mom, I can’t. I can’t go back there! It took everything I had just to come here!”

This wasn’t, factually speaking, actually true. Once she realized she’d been ready, it was an easy trek. Emotionally, anyway. Damn knee. But she’d never even considered the possibility her people would have moved into Mount Weather. The news that they had left her shaky, with clammy hands
and pinched lungs. Scattered visions of burned bodies filling her memory.

Abby turned at looked at her. Really looked this time. After a long moment, she nodded. “Okay. I get that. You need to adjust. But Clarke,” Abby paused abruptly. Then with a sharp shake of her head, went on, “You are a prize. A symbol. A target. You will be safest inside Mt. Weather. Everyone around you will be safer too.”

“Why the hell are you inside that place at all?”

“You took it, Clarke. You won it. You and Bellamy and the rest. At great cost to yourself and to everyone else. It’s yours – and by default ours – by right of conquest. And it is a rich, rich prize. It’s also shelter, food, supplies, information, history. It’s not everything we need in the long run, but a huge advantage for the present.”

“I don’t understand.”

“We broke the old order here, Clarke. First by sending you, and then by following ourselves. We didn’t know there was an order to break, but there was. Whatever we might think of the way the Mountain Men held the tribes in check, they did. Now that check is gone. The tribes are jockeying for position and power, testing themselves against each other and against us. New alliances take time and trust, but we may not have much time. We have no trust at all. But we need the alliances anyway. It’s best to deal from as much strength as we can.”

“So it’s all war, all the time? Haven’t we done enough harm?”

“Yes. We’re trying Clarke. We’re trying to do better. You coming home will help with that.”

“By becoming mountain men ourselves?”

“No. We aren’t the mountain men. We are Arkers. Our goal is the same as it ever was. To keep the human race alive. To deserve to survive.”

“By living in a crypt?”

“Clarke. Honey.” Abby let the hand she’d raised drop. Seemed to recognize that her appeal was falling on closed ears and changed course. “We try not to drive after dark, so let me tell the convoy to go back without us. Major Chavez? Can you find us quarters for tonight?”

Chavez assured her they could and within a remarkably short time Clarke found herself on a table in the infirmary, her mother poking and prodding at her knee.

“It’s fine, mom. I just twisted it when I slipped a week or so ago. It’s healing on it’s own. Really.”

“Okay,” Abby sighed and smiled as she straightened up. “You’re right. Nothing but time and staying off it as much as you can.”

Clarke rolled her eyes. “Earth hasn’t been big on opportunities to sit still.”

Abby actually laughed. “More than you’d think.”

Which made Clarke blink and remember. “Mom? How’s your hip?”

Abby stilled while washing her hands. In hot running water Clarke noted. “Mostly healed,” she replied after a second or two, shaking off the excess and reaching for a towel. “I can feel weather shifts now though. Something I always thought was a fictional trope turns out to be based on
something real.”


“It’s almost supper time. Let’s go eat, and I’ll try to answer all your questions.”

Clarke pushed her fork around the plate, chasing the last of the crumbs of the sweet desert bread.

“Okay. I can accept the strategic and tactical value of claiming the fortress at Mount Weather and all it’s resources for ourselves. But why actually live there?”

“The winters here are cold Clarke. Colder even than living in space. And much, much wetter. We’re still acclimating. Our people have been sick, a lot. Colds. Flu. Even some pneumonia. They need to be warm. And well fed. Especially the children. The mountain offers all of that. Including year round fruits and vegetables from their hydroponic gardens. Also too – not everyone is as at ease in the open as you are. Our people are used to corridors and confined spaces. The mountain – it feels familiar. Comfortable. Safe.”

“A trap. A tomb.”

“No. We’ve opened up all the exits we’ve found – turns out there were a lot more than the Wallaces acknowledged. Most were unused, of course, because the people couldn’t go outside without radiation gear. But it’s neither a trap nor a tomb. It’s just a base. And not everyone lives there.”

“Right. Some live here.”

“Yes. In rotations. And we’ve opened an outpost at the drop ship as well.”

“Why?”

“The Grounders respect strength. We won the fight,” Abby paused, and then reached over and closed her hand over Clarke’s, “You kids won that land. At great cost. Holding it as our own respects that. Abandoning it would make us look weak. Vulnerable. Beatable.”

Clarke pulled her hand free and into her lap. “So we have three outposts.”

Abby raised her chin. “We have all the territory the Mountain controlled, extending now out to include the drop ship and Camp Jaha.”

“And we guard it against all comers.”

“Well, yes and no. We’ve been working hard to create trade relationships.”

“So we didn’t steal the horses and cows?”

“What?” Abby looked shocked. “No we didn’t steal them! Clarke! We’re trying to make friends, not enemies!”

Clarke remembered TonDC, Lexa’s camp. All those warriors. Their steady disdain for the 100 and the people of the Ark. “What could we have that the grounders could possibly need or want?”

“Treatment for the reapers, to start with.”

“Oh.” Clarke felt a little ashamed that she’d forgotten all about them.

“And medicine and medical training for their doctors. They’ve created quite an amazing
pharmacopeia over the last century, but vaccines and antibiotics are better still. And we have much better surgical skills and facilities than most of them have access too. Also, genetic counseling.”

“Genetic counseling?”

“Birth defects are terrifyingly common among the Grounders. Their usual treatment is infant exposure.”

Clarke blinked. “Infanticide?”

“They’ve had very limited resources. Caring for children or adults who can’t pull their own weight was impossible, and heartbreaking, for them. The mountain – given their own genetic problems – had actually made some breakthroughs that we hadn’t in terms of genetic sequencing and testing. Once we explained what we can do we’ve been approached a dozen times now by pregnant women and their partners, hoping to know ahead of time what they might be in for.”

“I see.”

“Clarke, we are trying to be good neighbors.”

Falling asleep in a real bed for the first time since she’d left the Ark for the mountain, Clarke wasn’t sure she believed anything her mother said. Or rather, she was certain that everything her mother said was technically true, but there was much she still wasn’t sharing. Clarke wondered what it was, and when it would show up to bite them all in the ass.

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In the morning Clarke woke up planning to refuse point blank to ever return to Mt. Weather. Abby, who knew her too damn well – at least when it came to some things – woke up prepared to fight her.

Being Abby, she didn’t waste time with opening feints. Full house, on the table. She handed Clarke a mug of steaming sweet tea, smoothed the covers and sat down uninvited, trapping Clarke in her own damn bed, and said, “Your friends will be very anxious to see you. Raven and Wick, Monty, Nathan Miller, Harper, Monroe, Jasper, all the rest – they are all waiting. Wondering what you’ve been up to, wanting to see for themselves that you’re really all in one piece. They’ve missed you so much. Worried and fretted about you.”

The calculated guilt thrust sank home. Damn her. She sipped her tea rather than answer right away. Suddenly it hit her. The glaring absence was just too much. “Bellamy? He’s not anxious to see me too?”

Abby chuckled faintly. “I’m sure he would be, if he knew. But he’s away.”

“Away?”

“Yes. Out of the blue, three weeks ago, John Murphy reached us by radio.”

“Murphy?!”

“Yes. It seems he took off with Thelonious, on his quest to find us a safe haven. They got separated, and John washed up at a sealed bunker on the coast of what once was Connecticut. Turns out he has learned a great deal about what caused the destruction of the world ninety-eight years ago. And he has reason to think it might still be out there. Might target us.”
“No shit.”

“No shit.” Abby frowned. “Anyway, we needed someone to go get him. Or at least retrieve all his intel. Bellamy volunteered to lead a small team. Lincoln and Octavia were willing to go as well. A few Grounders from Lexa’s alliance agreed to travel too, as guides. The route is quite dangerous – what was once most of New York City and half the state is now a treacherous desert wasteland – so they are skirting well to the west and then the north so as to stay in the forest lands. Lands that belong, as it happens, to the Ice Nation. So they are also traveling with a handful of fully recovered warriors from that tribe. Escorting them home.”

“Have you heard from them since they left?”

“Yes. The Mountain Men had satellite phones. Bellamy calls in every evening. They should arrive at Murphy’s bunker in two more days. They expect to be back to Mt. Weather – with or without Murphy – in two to three weeks.”

“And Lexa? How are her people?”

“Restless. Shaken. Stirring. Best we can tell.”

“Explain.”

“Could I explain in the car, on the way back?”

Clarke closed her eyes, shivered, and then gave in. Whatever ghosts haunted Mt. Weather were just going to have to suck it up. The murdering sky princess was coming home after all. Somehow it seemed inevitable. Maybe even just.

The trip turned out to be surprisingly short. Barely an hour out from the gates of Camp Jaha they turned onto a hastily repaired paved road.

“Mom?” Clarke interrupted her mother’s overly detailed explanation of the familial clan structure that underlay the nominally distinct tribes of Lexa’s shaky alliance. “Where did this road come from?”

Abby smiled. “It was always here. Just overgrown. There were some washouts,” the utility vehicle (that’s what type it was, Clarke had learned) suddenly swayed and bumped, “like that, that we’ve filled in temporarily. Come spring the engineers plan to dig it up and resurface the whole thing.”

The driver, a man Clarke vaguely recognized from the Ark, interrupted. “Should we head for the garages, Dr. Griffin?”

“No. Let’s take Clarke to the front gate, if you don’t mind?”

“Sure thing.” He picked up the radio handset from the control panel and sent the other two cars and the not-at-all-creatively-named four wheelers off on a side road while they continued to climb up the switchbacks.

“Not worried about ambush up here?” Clarke asked.

“No. Not up here.”

“Because we’re inside the gas barrier now?”

“We are, but it’s still completely out of commission. And will remain so. The last thing this world
needs is more artificial acid fog.”

“There’s not-artificial acid fog?”

“Turns out, yes. There is. It may be the result of the Mountain Men inadvertently seeding the atmosphere, or maybe they got the idea from the fallout storms. Either way, yes. Acid fog is real.”

“I never saw any!”

“You were west of the lake, too far into the foot hills. The fogs hug the lowlands and the delta by the sea. When they come.”

“Wait. How the hell do you know where I was?”

“Look! We’re here!” Abby cried.

The distraction worked.

At the top of the ridgeline, the wooded slope that had once marked the main entrance to Mt. Weather was completely gone. The trees had been cut back for a hundred meters or more in every direction and the ground leveled out. Where there had been overgrown bushes and trees, there were now several buildings, including what had to be a barn with paddocks out back and to the side and honest-to-god hitching posts in front. There was one other large new building. Like the barn, it was constructed from what had to be wood. Smooth wood boards, fading to a warm cinnamon brown. The other four buildings were Quonset huts. Behind them were a scattering of Grounder-style field tents.

The main gate to Mount Weather, they gate they’d opened at such cost and where Lexa had abandoned them to face the Mountain alone, stood wide open. The passageway behind it that led into the mountain fortress itself was brightly lit. A steady stream of people were wandering in and out, all of them passing under the very watchful eye of a half dozen Ark guards.

Clarke gaped. “What is all this? And where did all these people come from?”

“Come on. I’ll show you. And the mountain had tracked all of the pieces of the Ark. We found more survivors.”

The larger wooden structure turned out to be a meeting hall. A meeting hall that today hosted what looked a hell of a lot like the old Exchange on the Ark. Tables covered in various goods, stall keepers seated behind their wares, shoppers wandering about. Some of the shoppers were even Grounders.

“What are they doing up here?” Clarke whispered to her mother.

“They have family here, receiving medical treatment or who are in recovery from the Cerberus program. That’s what’s in the other buildings. A fully equipped field hospital and recovery wards.”

“How did you guys make all this stuff?”

“Most of it we didn’t.” Abby touched her elbow. “There’s a small canteen outside. We can sit there while you catch your breath.”

“I’m not out of breath, mom.”

“Are you ready to go inside, then?”
“Lunch sounds good.”

“Whomever stocked Mt. Weather – the US Government we assume – planned to survive whatever came and then emerge into the new world and build again. So they had all of this and more in vast storerooms below the hydroponic floors. They horded what they could have shared or traded for the genetic materials they needed to adapt to the surface.”

“Are we sharing it?”

“We are trading some, and using some.”

“And hording the rest.”

“Clarke. We’ve been on the ground less than six months. Blowing all our resources even before the first winter solstice would be unbelievably reckless.” Abby shrugged ruefully. “Even for us.”

“What else did they have?”

“You saw the art. The libraries. Recorded music and movies – a far greater collection than we had on the Ark, though focused hugely on the cultural production of the western world. Labs. Data processors. Seeds. Genetic material and frozen embryos for farm animals. Vehicles. Heavy machinery – earthmovers, diggers and the like. Gas. Lots and lots of gasoline. Even three helicopters that no one is willing to try flying yet. Tools. The lumber for the meetinghouse and the barn is new. Turns out we have chain saws and the equipment for a water powered saw mill.”

“They were ready for anything.”

“Not really. Not for a world they couldn’t walk in.”

Abby flagged down the woman working the counter and ordered two sandwiches and something called coffee. Once they’d carried their food to one of the outdoor tables, Clarke sat down and said, “I haven’t forgotten by the way.”

“Forgotten what?”

“That you knew I came from the west.”

“Ah. That. Its easier to show than tell.”

“Of course it is.”

“Eat up. What do you think of the coffee?”

After they handed their dishes back, Abby brushed her hands on her trousers, took a deep breath and said, “Ready to go inside?”

“No. But I will anyway.”

Walking through the front gate was wildly different than coming up through the deep tunnels far below. Lighter for one thing. And smelled far better. After they passed through two sets of sliding glass doors, (humidity control, her mother murmured), the white hallways were lined with sculptures.

Her determination not be impressed by the art collection of vampire thieves was completely undone when they passed a roughly sculpted bronze of a heavily pregnant woman. Clarke stopped and gasped. “Mom? Is that a Picasso? For real?”
“Yes. From the Hirshhorn Museum Collection.”

“Well fuck me.”

Clarke ignored her mother’s side eye.

“There is so much they saved,” Abby said. “They didn’t share any of that either. We want too, but, at least right now, the tribes aren’t interested. The old world is dead to them. Far more dead to them than to us.”

“So what do you plan to do with it?”

“We,” Clarke heard the faint stress Abby put on the word, “will save it and preserve it best we can. For whomever comes after us. Whenever they are interested.”

“This way,” Abby suddenly cut to her left and called an elevator. The rode down to what Clarke immediately recognized as the command floor. The one where a not-quite madman had painted meticulous copies of masterworks and hazy half-remembered landscapes of a world bathed in sunlight.

Her heart started racing even faster and her palms damp with sweat, Clarke muttered, “I swear to God if you are taking me to the command and control room I will never forgive you.”

“No. I’m not. We’ve set up the screens in what must have been intended as mission control for something space related.”

They turned down a corridor Clarke hadn’t traveled before and her breath eased in her chest.

The room, a slopped amphitheater, was set up to face banks of screens. Three techs bent over desks filled with small computers. It reminded Clark of the few times she’d been inside the monitoring stations on Alpha.

“We can monitor everything but locker rooms and private sleeping quarters from in here. We also,” Abby gestured, “have a nearly 360 degree view of the land that fell within the territory claimed by Mt. Weather. They had a very extensive network of cameras and sensors, supported by satellites and drones. There was no sneaking up on them.”

Light began to dawn for Clarke. “How far does that territory run, south and west of the lake?”

“Far enough.”

“So, you’ve been watching me. This whole time.”

“Yes. Both from here, and from a guard post above your campsite.”

“What the fuck, mom.”

“You needed time. But we needed you not to be taken again. You’re an avatar now, Clarke. A symbol. A hero. A token. And an extremely valuable hostage for anyone who wanted to pry resources out of our hands.”

“I thought I was alone. I thought I survived by my own hand.”

“You were and you did. No one helped you. In fact we kept people away. Though, if it had looked like you couldn’t make it. A badly broken leg, for instance,” Abby looked meaningfully at Clarke’s bum knee, “Or say, pneumonia, and we would have brought you in.”
“Now I feel like a child.”

“No. A woman who needed time to come to terms with herself. There is so much we can’t give you Clarke. But we – all of us, your people, your family – we could give you that.”

“I’d look really foolish running away again, now, wouldn’t I?”

“No. But I hope you won’t.”

“Can you take me to Raven now?”

“Yes. Of course.”
“Bury them!”

“Incinerate them!”

“Throw them out for the wolves!”

Marcus Kane stood up and banged on the metal table with his gavel. Once everyone in the room had returned to their seats, he said, “We’ve returned to the earth. It’s the least we can do for them.”

“No,” a man Bellamy didn’t recognize stood as well. “With all due respect, General, it’s more than we can do for them. By the time we get back, they’ll have been rotting up there for a day and a half already. Unless we can bury them deep enough, scavenger animals will just dig them up again.”

Bellamy didn’t stand up. But he was sitting at the front table so he didn’t have too. He pitched his voice low and deep, filling the room but speaking softly, knowing this was a voice that people responded to. Listened to. Were persuaded by. He said, “They dumped grounders out with their trash. Dumped ours out with the trash. Whether or not they were completely dead. Left them to feed the reapers and the rats.”

Kane looked at him, an appalled expression on his face. “They did what?”

Bellamy raised his eyes to look directly at Kane. “You heard me.”

“We burn them.” Chancellor Griffin’s expression was grim. “It’s all we have time for.”

Kane looked around the room. “Any objections?”

He was met by a sea of cold eyes and set jaws.

“Okay then. Everyone has their instructions and their maps. Team leaders? Let’s go.”

Bellamy had never expected to go back to the mountain at all. He’d certainly never expected to be standing again in the middle of the Mountain Men’s luxuriously appointed dining hall, directing the removal of scores of bodies gone soft and swollen, bowels tearing open, bones ripping through fragile skin if they were lifted too quickly.

He’d thought the children would be the hardest. He was wrong. They could be lifted easily into their funeral sheets, and it was no hardship to treat them with gentle hands.

It was the elderly. Their skin already thin with age and genetic weakness, their bodies dissolved to squishy puddles that required dustpans and shovels, then sand and sawdust to absorb the stinking goo left behind.

He lifted and swept, the work all-too familiar. The irony so rich it gagged him as it slid down the back of his throat. His twelve months as a janitor were turning out to be the most practical experience he’d drawn on since he hit the ground. Bellamy Blake. Captain of the Broom Squad. Hero of the disinfectants. He kept breaking out into entirely inappropriate fits of more than faintly hysterical giggles.

The teams working with him looked at him with tender and sympathetic glances, finding excuses to
pat his arm or squeeze his shoulder whenever they passed him. Some stupid ass advice passed on by medical for dealing with battle shock, no doubt.

When the room was nearly cleared of the rotting dead and the spoiled, uneaten food from their last meal, Octavia appeared in the grand doorway. She’d washed the paint off her face, but her fierce braids were tighter than ever. “Bell,” she called. “You’re scaring everyone. Turn the job over to your second and get your ass outside. Now.”

Outside wasn’t better, he thought. It wasn’t any better at all.

Kyle Wick and a few Mecha-heads had found the tool rooms, broken out chain saws, wood chippers and some kind of enclosed-cab, mower thing he kept calling a Brush Master Beast. Then he’d laugh and pat it affectionately while making heart eyes at Raven Reyes, who had her hands wrapped firmly around the controls. And yes, Bellamy thought to himself, he did mean that in all possible permutations of entredres.

It was loud outside. So, so loud. Chain saws roaring and screeching as they dropped tree after tree. Trees falling with sharp cracks, sudden whooshes as their leafy crowns sliced the air, and then reverberating thuds as they hit the ground. The Brush Master Beast growled and whirred as it ate up the ground cover, leaving disgorged chop in it’s wake.

And it smelled. Blue puffs of exhaust, burnt and acrid. Intensely green, spicy and fresh, trees in their death throes. The wet ground, churned and sliced, giving up musty dirt and roots and growing things.

Tree by tree, ring by ring they were clearing out a wider and wider space on the plateau in front of the main gate to Mt. Weather.

Others had brought out shovels and axes and dug and sliced a deep, lopsided oval in the middle of the open space and then filled that with branches and bushes, deadfall that teams of kids were dragging in. They’d tossed the bodies into the pile as they came up. One after another, dozens, then scores, then someone yelled, “Stop! Wait until it’s burning to toss in the rest.”

They pilled them up. So much fuel.

At last, as the purple dusk was turning to full dark, Kane stood up on a rough platform, quickly nailed together from logs and thick branches, and whistled for quiet.

“It’s time. If you’d like to stay, please do. If you’d rather not, I understand.”

The forty-six stayed. So did their parents. Those few who were still alive. So did most of the crews who’d worked to clean out the fortress.

So did Bellamy. He stood with Lincoln and Octavia as several of the delinquents stepped forward to help drench the pile of bodies and brush with gasoline. Others passed around makeshift scarves, pulling fabric from bags until everyone held one in their hands.

Abby Griffin limped forward and tossed a small burning brand onto the top of the pile, followed by two guards who lit the pile more systematically, from below.

The gasoline didn’t catch right at first. The only sound was the faint crackling as the fire snaked up the smallest branches, curling the tiniest leaves. Then, with a sudden “whump,” the blaze sucking the air in so fast sound had to race to catch up, the pile burst into flame, a burning crown dancing along the top of the heap, consuming the streaks of gas.
It took a surprisingly long time, Bellamy thought, for the fire to truly catch. But once it did, it roared. Which wasn’t a metaphor, he discovered. It had a sound. And that sound was a gusting wind as the air around them reacted to the heat, feeding the fire, carrying sparks and half burned bits high above them on its own thermal coils.

Great walls of white flame burned now at the base, shading to yellow and orange and red as the tendrils licked at the star-filled night.


It burned so hot that tossing the rest of the bodies in was something they had to do in turns, stripped down to their shirtsleeves as they ran in pairs to fling on the next. Other teams, armed with two meter long rebar in their hands, poked and stirred, making sure everything burned into bits.

They kept the fire burning hot all night long, adding wood and gas along with the bodies, until all the bones had cracked and fallen into the coals and turned red, then purple and finally black.

Finally, some time just before dawn, dry eyed, exhausted, covered in fine black soot, those who’d lasted the night agreed it was done. They let the fire burn out.

Volunteers arrived with barrels and hand pumps in the pre dawn light, soaking the ashes until the steam finally stopped.


“Can’t,” he croaked. He gestured impatiently for the water bottle in her hands. He drank half of it, then poured the rest over his face and hands, his skin tight and dry from the heat of the fire. “We have to be ready.”

“You really think they’ll come today?”

Bellamy looked at Lincoln. “What do you think?”

“I think Kane lit a beacon. They’ll come today.”

“Then at least take a shower, Bell. And eat something. You look like hell.”

“What should I look like?”

“Like a victor,” Lincoln said.

Bellamy had no idea if he looked like a victor or not, but he felt a hell a lot better. Unlimited hot water, courtesy of the Mountain’s geothermal heat pumps, and a bowl of some sort of lentil-y stew and he was, if not a new man, a much more presentable one.

When he and Lincoln stepped outside again there was no sign of the burn pit. It had already been filled, tamped down, rolled smooth and covered with wood chips.

Next to it they’d set up a big tent pavilion. It was really amazing – or maybe not, they’d meant to survive Armageddon after all – just how much crap the Mountain Men had stashed away. All tagged, cataloged and stored in well-organized stock rooms.

Kane was already there, and Abby Griffin, and a handful of other senior leaders he barely knew. They were looking down at a pair of small computers.
“When did they cross the perimeter?” Bellamy asked.

“Two hours ago,” Kane answered.

“Huh. They must have been on their way before we even lit the bonfire.”

“Yes.”

“We got here just in time.”

“The animals aren’t the only scavengers in this world.” Griffin remarked.

“How long do we have?” Bellamy asked.

Kane looked at Lincoln.

“Two hours. Maybe less.” Lincoln answered the question in the General’s eyes.

“Okay. Hold on to your hats,” the chancellor said. “Phase two begins.”
Lights! Camera! Action!

Bellamy was terribly disappointed with the sound the gate locks made. He wanted a ‘clang’ or a ‘bang’ or at least the comforting sound of metal sliding on metal.

Instead they ‘snicked.’ Quietly.

He turned his head to catch his sister’s eye. “I was hoping for something more dramatic.”

Octavia rolled her eyes. “We’re still on the outside, big brother. And the doors won’t open until Chancellor Griffin gives the word.”

“Or Jackson wrestles Sinclair for the controls.”

This time Octavia laughed, snorting behind her hand when Kane sent them a stern glance. But from the way the corner of his mouth quivered, Bellamy was pretty sure he was laughing on the inside, too.

Kane was proving to be quite the conundrum. For a man whose complete and uncompromising devotion to duty was legendary, he also had a quicksilver smile, a charming tongue when he wanted to, and the instincts of the bossiest set designer this side of the moon.

They were sitting in a rough semi-circle of chairs and sofas, hauled out from the fortress behind them. A low coffee table sat before them, spread with food. Beyond the table, the ground had been covered in carpets and pillows were scattered about for reclining. They were facing what had become the main trailhead leading down (or up) the mountain. The path Commander Lexa and her advisors were traveling. They would emerge into the open space any minute now.

Kane had been unbelievably picky – rejecting piece after piece until he had his stage dressed just the way he wanted it. Even the chancellor got snapped at when she tried to intervene.

It was now pretty damn impressive, and Bellamy decided that maybe Kane had a purpose in all his fussy madness. The furniture was all low profile, comfortable and fully upholstered in bright colored fabrics, golds and reds and greens and blues. The table was a two layered, glass and beaten metal affair that weighed a fucking ton. The carpets and pillows were also all brightly colored. The tent itself was white.

The dishware? All cut or blown glass, sparkling in the midday sun. In the middle of the table? A big bowl of bright green limes.

The eight gathered dignitaries – and how utterly freaking bizarre that he and Octavia and David Miller counted among them – were all dressed in shades of grey and black, just like they had on the Ark.

He hoped the drones were snapping lots of pictures.

“Remind me what the point of all this is, again?” he asked, for no good reason except to fill the uncomfortable silence.

Lincoln, who had chosen to stand behind the small sofa he and Octavia were sitting on, positioned between them, leaned down. “Victory,” he said.

Kane glanced up from the tablet in his lap, tucking it down beside him. “Here they come.”
Bellamy just knew he was dying to add, “Places everyone.” But somehow, he contained himself. Superhuman strength of will probably.

Lexa barely broke her stride as she entered the freshly cleared ground. Ground that had been nothing but scraggly, untracked forest when she left them all there to die. Three nights ago. Her raccoon-like eyepaint made it impossible to hide the way her gaze darted around however. Her half-dozen guards and attendants weren’t so nice. They went ahead and swiveled their heads. Even Indra.

She went back to glaring at Lincoln and Octavia once she’d taken in all the changes though.

As the Grounders approached the edge of the pavilion, Kane rose to his feet and called out, “Heya, Heda. Mounin kom osir Maun-de. Greetings, Commander. Welcome to our Mt. Weather.”

Lexa raised her hand, halting their progress.

“Please,” Kane held out his own hand, indicating the ground cushions. “Won’t you join us, for some refreshment and some talk?”

Lincoln translated Kane’s words into Trigedasleng almost as soon as Kane fell silent.

“I apologize for not speaking your language. I am just beginning to learn,” Kane said.

Lincoln’s quiet voice followed, carrying Kane’s words into Trigedasleng.

Bellamy wondered if Lexa had any way of knowing that Kane was lying. His grasp of Trigedasleng was amazingly good, much better than Bellamy’s own, even if his pronunciation, according to Lincoln and Octavia, still sucked.

“You welcome us?” Lexa managed to convey so much disdain with those three words, Bellamy wondered that she didn’t fall over backward from looking too far down her own nose. “In whose name?”

Kane grinned at her. “Our own, of course,” he said. And then he dropped casually back into his own chair, settling in and crossing one leg over the other, completely at his ease. His chair, deliberately, was no higher or larger than the rest. “Please,” he said again, gesturing to the carpets. “Join us.”

“We will stand,” she said. And strode into the tent.

She came to a stop about a meter away from the edge of the table, her crew flanked out behind her.

“Suit yourself,” Kane said, Lincoln’s translation a soft echo after him.

Bellamy had vaguely grasped the advantage Kane was angling for in his frantic burst of interior design mania, but now he saw it clearly. There was no move Lexa could make right now that didn’t end up with her in the position of seeking an audience on someone else’s turf.

“You are not welcome here,” Lexa began.

“You have certainly made that quite plain,” Kane said.

“The Mountain does not belong to you.”

“Oh yes. It does,” Kane said. “We won it. Fair and square. After you betrayed our alliance and turned your back on us. Expecting we would all die horribly at the hands of your old adversaries.
Enemy of my enemy is my friend, yes?” Real anger edged Kane’s words, and Bellamy heard it again in Lincoln’s translation behind him.

“You could not have won it without our assistance.”

“You’re correct, Heda. We could not have. And had you fought with us, as you swore to do, you and your alliance would have had a claim to your portion of the spoils. But you accepted a deal with Dante Wallace. You took your people out of the Mountain – after Bellamy had already freed them, mind you – and then you quit the field. By your own choice, your efforts here have already been fully compensated. You are entitled to no more of what is now ours.”

Lexa started to speak, but Chancellor Griffin stopped her. “If, Heda, you would like to reconfirm your agreement with Wallace, with us in his place, we would be happy to talk, and to mark a new friendship with gifts and trade.”

Lexa exchanged a long look with Indra, then turned back to Kane and Griffin and shrugged. “I don’t think so. Not today.”

Indra suddenly stepped forward, hand on the hilt of her sword and barked, “Nau!”

Nothing happened.

Indra waited half a beat, then drew her blade. If the mammoth coffee table hadn’t been in her way, she would have had it at Kane’s throat, but the furniture stymied her long enough for Kane to touch his earpiece. “Major Chavez? Would you escort the rest of our guests out please?”

Indra and the rest of the Grounders, who all had their blades in various states of readiness, froze. Except Lexa. Bellamy was pretty sure she was swearing under her breath.

Two dozen Arkers, all armed and all dressed in Guard uniforms – for the purposes of display, only eight of them were actually in the Guard, though the guns were real and loaded – stepped out of the trailhead. They were herding an equal number of Grounder warriors along in front of them, each warrior walking with bound hands clasped behind his or her head. Their feet were also shackled, and linked together. When they were about three meters back from the pavilion, Major Chavez halted the line, then poked and prodded his prisoners until they were spread out, side by side, at the limit of the ties that held their shackles together. “Ona graun,” he said.

When the warriors didn’t move, he helpfully demonstrated what he wanted by walking around and kicking in the backs of the knees of the man closest to the center of the line.

The ‘guards’ raised their weapons, safeties clicking off.

“Ona graun,” Lexa ordered.

The captured warriors knelt. Not all gracefully. Two of them actually toppled over completely and landed on their faces. They had to be yanked up by the closest guard. Bellamy found this obscurely satisfying.

Then Lexa sat as well, quite gracefully, nodding at her crew to do the same.

“Very well,” she said. “We will talk.”

“Good,” said Chancellor Griffin. And then she smiled. And her smile was somehow far more unnerving than Lexa’s frozen glare. “I hoped you’d feel that way.”
The excited yammering outside the Camp Jaha clinic got so loud Octavia finally looked up at Jackson. “Do you have any idea what’s going on?”

“No!” Jackson held up his hands. “Not a clue.” Then he grinned and gestured at the door with his head. “Go find out.”

Octavia grinned back, then turned to her patient. Well, not ‘her’ her patient, since she wasn’t a doctor, obviously! But he was a patient she was working with. “Matyn? You gonna be okay for a time?”

“Sha, gada. You go. Ai ste…” he paused, then offered her a optimistic smile, “better. I be better.”

Octavia smiled back, patting his leg. “You are better. And improving every day. Your English and your health.”

The former reaper nodded, sketching a quick wave with his fingers. Like the other two warriors in the clinic, his arms and legs were still secured to the bed. Not because they were necessarily a danger to others, but because they could still hurt themselves. Between seizures, nightmares, and a periodically unbearable instinct to claw the illusory bugs out of their veins with their fingerprints, or even their teeth if they had the chance, they had come to terms with their restraints.

Desperate reapers had been stumbling into the tunnels under Mt. Weather ever since the fortress fell to the Ark. They were hunting for their dose of Red, the highly addictive drug cocktail the Mountain Men had used to create and control their slaves. If medical teams didn’t get to the reapers in time, their hearts would stop from the withdrawal seizures. They’d lost more than a dozen men that way already. Dead on the tunnel floors before help could arrive. There were surely more out there somewhere, dying alone in the forest, too weak or confused to come in.

They’d lost another six more in the clinic inside Mt. Weather, their bodies finally giving out after their hearts failed from multiple resuscitation attempts. Forty-odd more were still alive, though many of them had been under the Red long enough that they were in incredibly ill health; dehydrated, malnourished, exhausted and very weak once the drug was finally flushed from their systems. Dr. Griffin had confided privately to Octavia and Lincoln that she though they would lose a few of these men as well.

Once their bodies were more or less stabilized, the emotional and psychological work could begin.

Because Octavia had more experience than anyone on Earth with helping a reaper on the road to recovery, she’d been pulled into the treatment program. Since she’d lost her position with Indra and the Woods Clan, since she and Lincoln had fully thrown in with the people of the Ark, working with the former reapers at least filled her time.

She’d been the one to suggest moving the strongest to Camp Jaha as soon as they were stable enough, mentally and physically. Get them away from the mountain, away from the villages, into a place with absolutely no former ties or memories.

That it got her and Lincoln away from enclosed corridors and still air, out from under the crushing weight of the mountain, was just a bonus. She told herself that anyway, and despite a sharp glint in
her eye, Dr. Griffin didn’t argue the point. Instead, she said she thought it was an excellent idea.

It was actually working pretty well, too, if Octavia did say herself. Which she did. Often. Just to make sure credit ended up where it belonged. Matyn had made the most progress so far, but the other two men were also making real improvements day to day. They were sitting up and eating real food, even beginning to talk with her – laughing as she attempted to explain drug withdrawal in Trigedasleng, and at their own struggles to find words to describe the tech they were living with.

Octavia followed the excited voices out to the main entrance, spilling outside with a growing crowd. Spying a familiar set of goggles, she grabbed Jasper’s arm. “What’s going on?”

“First Convoy. It’s finished the trip a day early. They’re almost here.”

Back at the mountain, Kane and Sinclair had hauled out all the old maps they could find and then located all the old roadbeds using current satellite images. Some of them were part of the Grounder’s trail network. Others were not. Using that information, they’d plotted the shortest, easiest, most protected route between the Mountain and Camp Jaha.

This was the path Octavia had walked days earlier, along with her three strongest patients and a handful of the forty-six and their few remaining parents. And one tough-as-nails grandma. Those who, like her, didn’t want to stay in the Mountain. As they walked they’d cleared away the easiest of the fallen logs, hacked back the undergrowth, marked the places washouts or streams had cut the road, the two bridges that had collapsed, and sent the data back by satellite phone once they arrived at Camp Jaha. People moving from Camp Jaha to the mountain did the same thing walking the other direction.

Today would mark a new stage in their adapting to the ground. No more walking between Mt. Weather and Camp Jaha. Raven and the remaining mechanics had broken out the fleet of all terrain vehicles. The Mountain Men had stashed them against the day they could move freely in the outside world. That day never came. The mountain men would never use them now. The Arkers were more than happy to use them in their place.

A line of a half-dozen vehicles was just rolling through the gate as Octavia wormed her way to the front of the spontaneous welcoming committee. Looking around, she realized that basically everyone who wasn’t actually on post performing guard duty was there.

The first vehicle was little more than an open-framed box on wheels, with two benches and a windshield. Kyle Wick was driving and Bellamy was riding shotgun. For real.

Octavia couldn’t help but laugh in delight when she saw him. He actually had a two-barreled shotgun resting in his lap – a shotgun! – and a rifle at his side.

Taking up the rear seat was Raven Reyes, her braced leg propped up on the rim of the door.

A ragged cheer went up from the small crowd, and Bellamy waved in acknowledgment. Raven started blowing kisses and bowing, which made everyone laugh and cheer louder.

As soon as Wick braked to a stop and cut the engine, Bellamy hopped out, slung his shotgun on his back, then leaned in and scooped Raven up off the seat. Seeing this, Wick shot him an evil glare and Bellamy, the asshole, just winked at him.

Raven immediately started squirming, banging on his shoulder. “Put me down, jerkface. I can walk on my own.”

Octavia called out, “You heard the lady. Jerkface.”
Bellamy carefully set Raven on her feet, and after waiting for her to catch her balance before he let go, turned to pull Octavia into a tight embrace. “That’s Captain of the Broom Squad, to you, O.”

Octavia tilted her head back and fluttered her eyelashes at him. “My Hero!”

“Hey! I’m a hero too!” Wick said, “Don’t I get a hug?”

“Depends. What kind of supplies did you guys bring to this dump?” Octavia said.

“Oh!” Wick replied, rubbing his hands together in excitement, “Just wait till you see!”

They had food. They brought flour and potatoes, bread and crackers, canned vegetables and spices, cured meats and nuts, all raided from the Mountain’s storerooms. They had medical supplies, parts for a better radio tower, plus lots of jerry cans full spare gas, and boxes and boxes of ammo.

They also had four more patients for Octavia and Jackson. Dazed-looking warriors with cloth wrist bindings and loose trousers and flapping shirts clambering out of the trucks and cars with expressions ranging from sickly confusion to excited glee. This last one, a tall, skinny-looking kid who appeared hardly older than Octavia herself, was so animated that his driver shook his head and with an amused twist of his lips, popped the hood and started pointing out the parts of the engine.

She caught Lincoln’s eye and nodded at the kid. Lincoln smiled as he followed her glance. “I think that one will be okay.”

“All right,” Jackson said from behind her shoulder, “Let’s get this new crew settled, yeah?”

They’d just finished clearing out rooms across from the main clinic and setting up a new recovery ward when music started blasting through the compound. Swelling strings, hard driving beat, then “You ready? Let’s go,” and the words from “Remember the Name,” spilled out into the world for the first time in years, Octavia guessed. Decades even.

Jackson looked at Octavia, and then they both started to grin, swaying to the beat, chanting the old lyrics along with everyone else who’d grown up on the Ark, both of them laughing at Lincoln’s bewildered expression as they danced around him. When the song ended, Kyle Wick’s voice came over the new PA system. “That’s just the first tune, ladies and gentlemen. Kick back, settle in, Wick’s Special Mix is coming to you straight from outta space,” and then the opening cords of the next track took over.

By the time Octavia made it back outside for a quick breather in the open air, the sun was dropping toward the horizon and the light was tinting everything a deep gold.

The music was still playing, eager hands were setting up a generous picnic spread on the outside tables and then Bellamy wandered up beside her, his arms full of bulky things. “Miller,” he was yelling to be heard over the music, “Miller? Where the hell are you, man?”

“Right here,” Nathan said irritably. “I’m helping with the food. What do you want?”

Bellamy spun toward him, a huge grin on his face. “Guess what I found.” Then he held out his hands. He was carrying a pair of large metal circles with brackets on one side, and a heavy, lumpy white sack.

“Oh my freaking God. Is this…?” Nathan’s eyes had gone wide and shiny and he was beginning to grin as he reached out with greedy hands to take the metal hoops.
“Basketball, man. We can play basketball.”

“Where the hell did you find these?” he asked, clutching the hoops protectively to his chest.

“In a store room behind the gyms. I didn’t want to take down the ones there, so I went looking. Found extras. Come on. There’s even backboards. Wick said he’d help us with the poles.”

Octavia rolled her eyes at her brother’s retreating back. Basketball. It was an obsession on the Ark. Fantasy leagues and real life intramurals. She’d watched old games and live feeds from the quarterly tourneys nearly all her life, Bellamy jumping around the room and yelling at their tiny vid screen. Catching her around the waist and lifting her up and tossing her, pretending she was the ball or she had the ball as they reenacted what they saw on the screen. She’d’ve thought, she sniffed, that while they were fighting to hold on to their lives on the ground, maybe they could put their games aside. Bellamy disagreed. Obviously.

She’d left Lincoln sitting with their new patients. He was getting them oriented, explaining in their own language what would be happening to them as they entered the next phases of withdrawal and recovery. To make up for abandoning him, she begged a plate and filled it full of fruit and crackers and headed back inside.

By the time they were escorting their little crew of hobbled patients to stand in line for the evening meal, the shadow of the Ark stretched long and cool across the plain, the lights were bright up on their poles, and Bellamy and Miller had managed to mount one backboard and hoop on a freshly sunk standard. Wick was hanging precariously from a ladder as he finished adjusting yet another spotlight on the radio tower, cheerfully ignoring the instructions Raven was shouting out from the ground.

Lincoln stopped and stared at the addition to the center of the camp. Then he turned to Octavia, surprised recognition gleaming in his eyes. “Is that…?”

“A basketball hoop? Yep. It sure the hell is.”

“You know basketball?” Bellamy had come to cut the line by joining them now that they were at the front.

“Yeah.” Lincoln still looked utterly amazed.

“You play?” Bellamy looked eager. Octavia sighed.

“Yeah. I do. Or,” Lincoln shrugged, “I did. When I was younger.”

“None of us have played since earthfall, or,” Bellmay glanced over at Miller and some of the other boys, “longer still.”

Lincoln frowned doubtfully. “You played…?”

“In space?” Bellamy finished, pointing up at the darkening sky. “Yeah. It’s a good all round workout, doesn’t need that much room.” Bellamy caught Lincoln’s eye and grinned. “After we eat, bet I can beat you at HORSE.”

“Horse?”

“Five point game. One on one. What do you call it?”

“Pleifai. Play five. And what’s the bet?”
“Loser helps with clean up.”

“You’re the janitor, not me.”

“Oh, you are so going to regret that.”

As soon as they’d finished their food, Bellamy stood up and slipped out of his coat. “Ready?”

Lincoln grinned. “Sha, man.”

Bellamy palmed a ball from the bag on the edge of the half-court, then started bouncing it on the hard dirt. Wick had turned down the volume of the music so that people could talk through their supper without yelling themselves hoarse. In the relative quiet, the distinctive ‘thunk, thunk, thunk’ of the bouncing ball quickly caught attention.

Then Lincoln stood up, stripped off his jacket, and ambled out to the court, shaking out his shoulders and hands, rolling his neck, bouncing on his toes. Wolf whistles, clapping and scattered cheers rang out as the nearest diners realized what was happening.

Bellamy bounced the ball toward Lincoln, calling out, “Home team starts the ball.”

Lincoln grinned, then slowly started to dribble. As he caught the feel of the ball and the rough surface, he leaned forward, dropping into a wide stance, rising up on the balls of his feet, dribbling faster and lower. Octavia began to wonder just how recently Lincoln was ‘younger.’ Bellamy, star player on his school teams until he graduated into the guard, mirrored him, leaning in, hands held wide, blocking Lincoln’s view and his movement. Lincoln grinned, then bounced the ball between his legs, changing hands, and laughed.

Taking advantage of Bellamy’s surprise, Lincoln dodged around him and drove to the basket, easily sinking a layup as Octavia and Jasper cheered.

His second basket went in as smoothly as the first, but Bellamy blocked his third shot and claimed the ball. He quickly dropped in two middle distance jump shots, and then a layup before Lincoln had the ball back. Octavia cheered and booed them both, but most of the rest of the diners quickly chose a side and bets were already hitting the table. Gambling, naturally enough, was the only pastime that rivaled sex and drinking on the Ark.

Lincoln pulled ahead with two more points, Bellamy blocked his next shot, sank the ball from nearly the three point line, then got stuck trying to drive for a layup and his fifth point.

The four patients who’d come out for supper were leaning forward, more light in their eyes than Octavia had yet seen. Then one of them touched Jasper’s arm and pointed to the pot, and with quick pidgin and hand signs an IOU was tossed in. Octavia realized they’d found one more point in common between to the two groups.

On the half-court, Lincoln pressed harder, every move Bellamy tried to take blocked. Finally Bellamy dropped back a step, palmed the ball into a slow, looping overhead pass, darted around a shocked Lincoln, caught his own pass and sank the layup to win the game, coming off his landing to leap up to rub the top of Lincoln’s head before spinning away in triumph.

“What the hell was that?” Lincoln said, as Bellamy danced away, hooting with his victory, bowing and waving to their laughing and clapping audience.

“Space Ball rules!” Bellamy said. “Passed to myself. Sank the basket. Won the game. Woo HO!”
He pumped the air with his fist, and the crowd yowled in return.

Matyn leaned close. “True rules?”

“Sure.” Octavia nodded. “Regulation rules for games with referees. Space ball rules for games like this. Don’t you have both too?”

“Two out of three,” called Lincoln, his eyes narrowing.

“Sure you’re up for it?” Bellamy crowed.

“Pass me the ball. Home court advantage.”

The next game was slower, both Lincoln and Bellamy playing such aggressive defense that at least twice they ended up in the dirt in a tangle of feet and arms. Finally Bellamy got so frustrated he yelled, “Yo! Jackson! Head up!” and passed the ball to him where he was standing on the near sideline.

Jackson caught it, then with a deep knee bend, rose up into a smooth jump and sank the ball, surprising himself as much as anyone else, Octavia thought, judging from his wide, shocked grin.

“Miller!” Lincoln yelled. “Pass it in.”

And just like that it was two on two. The next game was three on three.

In the end, everyone pitched in to clean up the remains of the meal.

Chapter End Notes

Obvious inspiration is obvious!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=veXvp6wRPiE
“What’s this?” Abby looked up from the conference table. The council had taken over an office suite outside medical for conducting their daily business. Easier for her to be close to patients, and more centrally located than Dante Wallace’s old lair. It was also brighter, cleaner and less freighted with the Old World for everyone else. Sinclair had called up for her and Kane to meet him there. Said he had something to show them.

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“From hydroponics,” Sinclair said.

Abby frowned. “It’s a plant.” She poked at the green frond Sinclair had dropped before her. “So?”

“Look at it, Dr. Griffin.”

Abby lifted it up and twisted it in the air, the bright lights eliminating any shadows as she turned the stem, five compound leaflets radiating alternately off a thick, faintly hairy stalk. Slowly the image in an old text rose in her memory, and with it, a name.

“Is this….,” she still couldn’t quite believe it. She looked up at Sinclair, “Cannabis?”

Sinclair laughed. “Two entire grow rooms devoted to the stuff. I’m guessing they get about a metric ton per harvest.”

Andrea Cho walked in. “No need to guess. They kept meticulous records, right in the grow rooms. And yes, just under a ton, four times a year. And it’s really rich stuff, according to the notes. Fantastic THC yields.”

“What the hell did they do with it all?” Abby asked in amazement.

“Wait,” Kane started to snicker, “I know.”

Sinclair was laughing now too, but trying to remain serious. “We haven’t found the records.”

“We will,” Kane was trying not to belly laugh, but the result was barely smothered giggles. “Now that we know what to look for. God knows they accounted for everything else. Even how much shit they dumped.”

“What?” Abby demanded, wondering what in the hell was so funny about discovering you’d just inherited a four-ton-a-year cannabis operation. “You can’t eat the stuff, and you’d need a fraction of that for any useful amount of THC for their small population, even if everyone took it every day.”

“Trade!” Kane was laughing out loud again, wiping his leaking eyes as he did. “Sons of bitches. That’s what they offered. God what a world.”

“Marcus!”

Kane shook his head. “You know we’ve been wondering how their intel on what was happening in Polis, even pretty privileged stuff like the details of clan alliances and trade, was so damn good. Obviously they weren’t out there collecting it themselves. They had to be paying informants for it.
We couldn’t figure out how or with what. Now,” he nodded and waved at Sinclair, chortling too hard again to keep talking.

Sinclair finished for him. “Now we know. They were their suppliers.”

“Holy shit,” Abby said. “They weren’t a functioning government at all, anymore, were they? They were nothing but a cartel!”

Chapter End Notes

I wondered. Didn't you?
“How long has that been going on?” Octavia growled low in Monty’s ear, glaring across the evening fire to a couple on the far side.

The Arkers were continuing to make the mountain their own. Outside one of the secondary entrances some enterprising folk had set up a sort of outdoor cantina, selling homebrew booze and grilled snacks to people who weren’t on duty in the evenings. They’d even put up a little stage and ran it basically as an open microphone, though only recorded music was playing at the moment. She and Lincoln had arrived back at the Mountain earlier in the day, summoned by the council to translate for an upcoming summit with Lexa and some of the other clan leaders. They’d been stuck in meetings with Kane ever since. Finally free, they’d heard about the Cantina and had come hoping to find Bellamy there.

He was. But he was most definitely not alone.

Monty offered her a wide, innocent smile. “What been going on?”

Octavia was not amused.

She nodded her head toward the opposite side of the bonfire, especially at the woman draping herself all over her brother.

Echo. Princess of the Ice Nation. Or at least some sort of ranking member. Important enough that Lexa’s people had brought her along with a handful of others back to Mt. Weather when their own healers hadn’t been able to help them recover from their captivity in at the hands of the Mountain Men.

They were – in the least surprising development since ever – all suffering from variously severe complications of extreme anemia and dehydration.

As it happened, she and Lincoln hadn’t been there when Echo and the others arrived. They were still at Camp Jaha with their growing band of recovering former reapers. Without his ability to translate, Echo and the others had to be sedated before they could be hooked up to the IVs and – in deep irony lost on no one – given blood transfusions donated by Arkers.

“That,” she snarled, gesturing with her chin. “Bellamy and that Ice Nation girl.”

“I’m not sure?” Monty tried.

“Really?”


“Fine. I will.”

Unfortunately, Bellamy was even less helpful than Monty, once she’d pried him away from his Ice Nation body leech by dint of catching his eyes and glowering from across the floor.

“Not really your concern, O,” he said.

She fisted her hands on her hips. “When did you stop concerning yourself about my sex life?”

“Since I realized Lincoln is a great guy with fantastic abs. Who’s nuts about you.”
Octavia’s glance slid toward Lincoln, who was chatting with Monroe and Miller. She smirked a little, feeling proud and possessive and amazed all at once, like she always did when she looked at him. “Yeah. And his abs are fantastic. So is his everything else. I’m nuts about him, too.”

“I know.” Bellamy smiled fondly at her. “How’s the recovery program going?”

Octavia launched into a summary of all they’d accomplished in the month they’d been at Camp Jaha, even waging for Lincoln to come over and help her boast about their efforts. Two men had actually been released to their families now, and she thought more would be ready to go soon.

Unfortunately, Echo arrived hard on Lincoln’s heels. She promptly twined her lanky form all around Bellamy. She put Octavia in mind of some sort of parasitic vine.

Bellamy introduced Octavia as his sister, and Echo warmed slightly. Even unwrapping herself enough to stand on her own two feet and offer Octavia her hand. Octavia was slow to take it, until she felt Lincoln nudge her, clearing his throat quietly and otherwise urging her to be polite. She shook Echo’s hand and smiled through her teeth. “Nice to meet you. I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“Thank you. I’ve heard so much about you and I’m happy to finally meet Bellamy’s famous sister.” Echo said with an equally toothy smile. Her voice was low and pleasant, and her English was quite good. She also seemed sincere enough.

Octavia wanted to continue to dislike her, but found it suddenly uncomfortable. They’d all been fucked over by the Mountain Men. One way or another. She nodded. “Likewise. Listen, I need to chat with Bellamy privately, for just a few minutes.” She wrapped her fingers in Bellamy’s sleeve. “We’ll be right back.” And she towed him away.

“Spill,” she ordered, as soon as they were separated by enough people that they could pretend to privacy. “How long has this been going on?”

Bellamy crossed his arms and stared thoughtfully at her. Finally he said, “Almost as soon as they let her out of medical. I’d been visiting, just to check on her and the others. They were pretty freaked at first to be back in a modern clinic. I was a familiar face. Helped smooth things. She showed up at my quarters her first night out. I said I was very flattered, but it wasn’t necessary and tried to shut the door. She…. persuaded me not too.”

“How?”

“She has nightmares about being hung upside down and bled. I know what she’s talking about. About being poked and prodded. Stripped naked. Touched while you’re asleep. About wearing a collar and chains. About cages swinging from the ceiling. It’s good to be reminded you’re not there anymore. That you’re not alone in the night.”

“Oh.” Octavia felt a ginormous stab of guilt. “I didn’t think.”

“We all have our stories, O.”

“Is she nice?”

“I don’t know. Not really?”

Octavia’s faint willingness to be positive about Echo vanished. “What the hell does that mean? It means that I don’t know. I’m out on patrol all day. I don’t know what she does. We don’t talk.
We fuck at night because we don’t want to dream. We sleep together so we don’t bother anyone else. Other than that, I don’t think we have all that much in common.”

And now she felt sorry for Echo because her brother was such an ass. “You and Echo are hardly the only ones who had a rough time at the hands of the Mountain Men. If you’re both looking to get through the night, maybe a bigger support group could help all of you.”

“We fit each other right now. That’s all I need. Leave it alone.”

“I thought…” Octavia trailed off, frowning.

“Yeah?”

“I thought you were beginning to fit with Clarke?” she let her voice lift at the end, hesitant and gentle.

Bellamy’s face closed off. His voice was flat and faintly angry and he didn’t look at her. “Clarke obviously didn’t think so.”

Octavia bit down hard to keep her words in check. Clarke Griffin had rammed her head so far up her own ass because she thought her own shit smelled better than everyone else’s. Yeah, Clarke’d been through a lot. But so had every fucking one of them. Including Clarke’s own mother. But Clarke walked away. She abandoned Bellamy, who’d gone inside the mountain for her. Who blamed himself for not being able to save the Mountain Men’s kids, for the death of Maya and her family and friends who had helped hide them all. People he knew and liked and trusted. And killed. Trading their lives for the lives of forty odd stupid delinquents he’d decided he was responsible for. Even Clarke stupid Griffin. Octavia touched Bellamy’s arm. “She’ll be back. Give her some time.”

He flinched away from her. “Clarke isn’t here. Echo is. End of Story.”
“Shit,” Bellamy started coughing again. “Ack. I don’t think I like smoking.”

“Good,” Lincoln said, reaching over to take the small bone pipe. “It’s terrible for your lungs.” He put the pipe to his lips and inhaled deeply.

“You’re a fucking hypocrite, you know that,” Bellamy said, collapsing back onto the blanket spread out on the high meadow. Yet another entrance to the mountain popped up here, for no reason he could make out. Bolt holes. They’d had them everywhere, the sad, desperate bastards. Too bad they couldn’t use a damn one of them.

“I’m a healer and a scholar,” Lincoln said. Then he giggled.

“And apparently a raging dope fiend.”

Lincoln raised his brow. “Dope fiend?”

Bellamy shrugged. “I like Raymond Chandler.”

Lincoln looked down at Octavia, who was sitting between his knees, leaning back into him. He caught her eyes, made his ‘what’s-he-on-about-now?’ face, and jerked his thumb at Bellamy.

“Twentieth-century novelist. Writer. Classic noir detective stories,” Octavia answered his unspoken question. “Noir is, was … what the fuck is noir, Bell?”

“Noir – French for black, or sometimes dark – is a film style,” Bellamy said. “Hardboiled crime is genre fiction. When they filmed hardboiled crime writers like Chandler, the film style they tended to use was Noir. Hyper realism, cynical antiheroes, political and criminal corruption everywhere, and deeply repressed sex. Think Chinatown.”

“You sky people,” Echo said, holding out her hand and gesturing impatiently for Lincoln to pass the pipe along. “You talk about the strangest things.”

“Don’t you have stories? Plays? Poetry? Songs? Stuff to do on long winter nights,” Bellamy rolled over onto his elbows and looked up at Echo. “You know. In-between the other stuff,” he winked at her. She rewarded him with an exasperated huff. “Everyone has stories, right?” he added.

She drew her brows down in irritation. “Of course we do.”


Echo stiffened, her normally graceful sprawl suddenly rigid and angular. “I’m a warrior, not a priestess.”

“Okay. Not a sacred story, not if you don’t want too. Something easy.” Bellamy tried again, “Something funny. What’s a story your people tell to make the kiddies laugh?”

If anything she got stiffer. She raised her chin, the better to scowl down at him. “I am not a nursemaid either.”

“No shit,” Bellamy said, half under his breath, but before he could follow up that thought, Octavia interrupted. “We aren’t dope fiends. This is medicinal. Dr. Griffin said so. Quality Mountain Hashish. Helps with stress reactive disorders.”
Echo turned her head to include Octavia in her scowl. “I am no longer one of Dr. Griffin’s patients. I do not need her medicine.”

“It’s my pipe,” Lincoln said mildly. “Give it back if you don’t want it.”

“Healers,” Echo said, in voice that made her disdain plain. She handed back the pipe. Which was out, and nearly empty anyway. Lincoln offered it to Octavia, then leaned over and used his weird, complex lighter thingamabob for her.

“Shit,” Bellamy said again, flopping onto his back again and deciding to ignore Echo’s crankiness. He was enjoying his first day off in, well, like, he frowned, since landfall? Who cared why he was high, or who said it was okay?

“Have we even had a day off since we hit dirt?” he asked of no one in particular.

“You haven’t,” Octavia said. “You wouldn’t have taken one today if Kane hadn’t insisted.”

“That’s why we brought the kaff,” Lincoln added. “Help you relax.”

Bellamy started to laugh, letting his arms drop wide now that the buzz from his last hit on the pipe was finally making it’s way to his brain. “I’m so relaxed I don’t think I can get up.”

“Good,” Echo appeared over him. Her eyes seemed especially dark and her long hair fell forward around them as she leaned in. “I like you this way.”

He reached up and caught his hand around her neck, pulling her in for a lingering, sloppy kiss. After that she wiggled down so her head was resting against his shoulder, her arm around his waist and she could wind one long, slim leg between his. He closed his eyes, thinking that taking a nap here in the sun on what might be one of the last warm days of autumn seemed like an excellent plan.

His doze was interrupted when he heard Octavia mutter, “What’s he want now?”

Bellamy decided to leave his eyes closed. Maybe if he didn’t look, whatever was coming would pass him by and let him be.

“Sorry to bother you today,” said Marcus Kane, “I know how much you need this rest.”

Bellamy cracked one eye. “What?”

His brain started to click. “More Ark survivors?” He struggled to sit up, dislodging Echo, whose sleepy glower took in him and Kane equally. They were still looking for the last of the Ark, still hoping. They’d brought in just over two hundred and twenty more survivors already, but there were two small sections they hadn’t located. Probably burned up on entry, but, you could hope. Or not. “Grounders?”

“No,” Kane was standing over them, staring down. He didn’t look panicked or excited. Just worried. “Stranger, and more troubling,” he said.

Bellamy simply waited, telling himself he was completely resigned to whatever improbable shit might come next.

“John Murphy radioed in an hour ago. He has interesting news.”

And just like that, an adrenaline hit surged through him and Bellamy rolled to his feet.
“Fuck,” was all he could come up with to say.

Kane seemed to understand. “Indeed,” he said. He looked at the others. “Sorry to take Bellamy. I’ll return him as soon as I can. The rest of you, enjoy your afternoon.”
Clark stretched, rolling her neck from side to side as she pulled out the tightness across her shoulders and upper back. She’d been sitting still longer than she’d meant too.

Looking out over the lake, she realized that the sun was dropping fast. If she wanted to check her traps before dark, she needed to go now.

Frowning, she picked up the old sketchbook and examined her work. She was devoting her afternoons to cataloging the plant specimens she collected during the mornings. Working on her life drawing skills while she compared the samples to her patchy memories. Trying to identify where they were the same and where they were different from the native plants of this region in the before times.

Her latest – wasn’t half bad as plant study, she decided. But she had to go.

She trotted down the trail, headed for the shore. The trail had been hardly visible, weeks (weeks?) ago. It was really only the switchbacks with roughly set steps that caught her eye. Since she was walking the lakeshore, she knew there was nothing below, so she went up. At the top of the trail there was an old cabin. It obviously predated the cataclysm; on the far side from the lake was the just barely visible imprint of an old driveway. Beyond that, she’d discovered later, was a road. The undergrowth was thick, lush and unbroken. None but forest creatures had come this way in a long, long time.

The cabin itself had clearly been inhabited afterwards. Maybe even for a few decades or more. There were plenty of visible repairs. The oldest were done carefully and with great skill. The more recent – though they too hadn’t been new in a long, long time – were more haphazardly done. The roof was failing in one section, leaving old bedrooms exposed to the weather, but it was still solid over the main portion of the house, which included the kitchen and a bathroom, complete with an old dry toilet.

She couldn’t tell if the inhabitants had simply died off and the property abandoned, or if they had left for somewhere else. But they hadn’t been driven off or attacked. The house and its contents were stripped, not destroyed. In fact, she rather thought the Mountain Men must have occasionally used it as a rest base in recent years. There was wood stacked that couldn’t have been cut more than a few seasons ago. Someone had dragged an old metal bedframe into the great room, the one where the original open fireplace had been converted to hold what had once been a very efficient wood-burning stove. The chimney pipe had leaked and the interior of the stove had rusted out, but someone had patched it with a piece of slate and some sort of cement. The cement was barely scarred by fire, so she assumed that was also the work of whoever had left the wood.

The Mountain Men were gone now, too. She figured the house was hers as long as she wanted it.

Her traps turned up one fat rabbit; she’d gathered edible greens that morning.

Clark had always been an excellent student. Her goal had been medical training, like her mother. In the fullness of time she’d expected to be Dr. Griffin herself.

In the meanwhile, she’d aced all her earth skills classes, just as she had all the other subjects in school. She wasn’t naturally very good at any of the hunting or trapping or fishing, not like Finn or Monroe, but hunger, determination and a solid knowledge base to build on and she was surviving. At least for the present.
She sat by the big picture window – the old tempered, double-paned glass still solid, even if the wood around the metal frame was soft – and ate and listened to the tree frogs and the night herons.

In the morning, she decided, if it wasn’t raining, she was going to try again to conquer climbing a tree.
“Why can’t we walk?” Bellamy asked again. Or, possibly, whined. “I like walking.”

“Because,” Echo answered, with the weary air of someone who’d already answered the same question a hundred times or more. Which, to be fair, she had. “Horses are faster and more comfortable.”

“You have very strange notions about what’s comfortable, babe.”

“If you would push your heels back down and get your tailbone underneath you, so you aren’t crushing your bits into your saddle, you would be,” she shrugged, indicating that it was all the same to her if he didn’t, “in less discomfort.”

“I think riding is great,” Octavia offered, from the other side of the paddock where she sat elegantly astride her own horse. She’d taken to riding as effortlessly as she had everything else Earth had thrown at her. Bellamy thought he might hate her, just a little, for that.

“I think I’m in love with Big Red here.” Octavia leaned down and wrapped her arms around her mount’s thick neck.

“You know there’s reams of psychological theory about girls and their psycho-sexual hangups with horses, right? Big strong animals between their legs, control issues, being on top …,” he trailed off in the face of twin glares. He fake shivered, “Ow. I think my blood just froze up.”

“We leave for the Queen’s house in two days, Bellamy Blake,” Echo said, “If you are crippled when we get there, it will be no one’s fault but your own.”

“Right,” Bellamy sighed, then tried to re-arrange himself on the horse the way Echo suggested. He wished Lincoln were teaching them, or Matyn, or really any of the other grounders who hung around the Mountain or Camp Jaha these days. But they’d all insisted that the Ice Nation produced the best horses and the best riders, and that Echo was recognized as highly skilled even among her own people.

Which did not, from Bellamy’s perspective, translate into her being a very good teacher. At all. Mostly she snapped impatiently at him. The only times she softened were when she was talking to his horse. That was when he caught glimpses of the woman he knew in the darkest watches of the night. The one who woke up crying out for her mother. Or fighting for her life, striking out in rage and pain. The one who woke him out of his nightmares of blood and bone, burned flesh and scalding steam. Soothed him and stroked his hair and kissed his brow and promised him over and over that the mountain men were gone. That they couldn’t hurt anyone else, ever again. Held him when he cried for the children he hadn’t been able to save. Melted around him when he brought her to climax, again and again in their frantic quest for exhausted sleep too deep for dreams.

He frowned down at the coarse mane of the horse he was riding. Buddy or Butty or Bunny, sometimes he really couldn’t tell one hard consonant from another in Trigedasleng. If the stupid beasts could bring out the softer side of even a prickly bitch like Echo, maybe there was something he was still missing.

Lexa had agreed to let them pass through her clan lands to the borders of the Ice Nation. From there they hoped that with Echo and Matyn’s help, they could secure safe passage to the bunker where Murphy was holed up. They were trying to avoid the wastelands of what had once been
eastern New York state. According to Murphy’s first hand account and the Grounders’ more general knowledge, the wastes were treacherous in the extreme. On horseback, they would make good time on the longer, safer route, and perhaps, strengthen a few temporary alliances on the way.

Or at least learn a few things.

War was coming.

If not this spring, then the next. Without the heavy hand of the Mountain Men keeping them all in check, the clans were itching to try their strength against each other, settle old grievances, gain new advantage. Lexa was working like mad to avoid that outcome, but unfortunately her influence had been severely curtailed by her failure to seize the Mountain for her alliance when she had the chance. And if she worked too closely now with the Arkers, she risked being seen as a puppet rather than her own woman.

Whether they wanted it or not, Kane and Abby and the rest of the council believed that the Arkers would be drawn in when it came to actual fighting. They just didn’t know on whose side. Assuming they got to choose. Bellamy and Lincoln agreed with their assessment.

If they were all still alive come spring, that is. Murphy’s intel might change everything. Up on the Ark, they had always attributed the cataclysm – the war, Armageddon – to a combination of human stupidity and the unforgiving logic of computerized defense systems.

If Murphy was right, they had it backwards. Sort of. The computerized defense systems, and their unforgiving logic, may have decided that humans and their stupidity were the problem and proactively struck in order eliminate them. Murphy thought it was possible, given some of the things he’d seen, that the system was – at least partially – still on line. That if humans got too successful, the system might strike at them again. Which is why, after thinking about it for a while, he’d actually reached out, wanting to warn them. He was a vicious little shit, in Bellamy’s not-at-all-privately-held view, but he wasn’t actually a psychopath. Just deeply self-interested and profoundly untrusting. Despite it all, though, he still clung to notions of justice, fairness, and a form of human empathy. He really didn’t want to be the last man standing.

So they were going to get him, him and his information. Bellamy was leading the team. Which is why he was here in this stupid paddock on this stupid horse trying to improve his riding skills. It wasn’t very leaderly to be bouncing around painfully and swearing a lot.

“Heels down, Bellamy! And how many times have I explained? Use your legs, not your hands to direct your mount!”
“Clark, the bus is here.” Harper knocked on her doorframe. “Time to go.”

“Arggh.” Clarke scrubbed at her face. “Don’t wanna.”

“I know. But,” Harper waved her hands and made a spooky voice, “we’ve been summoned.”

“I’m working.” Clarke picked up her charcoal again.

“Your plant studies aren’t going anywhere, and winter is coming. There’s no rush to finish.”

“Yes. There is. We need to know, before planting season. What’s the same. What’s different. The Mountain’s data doesn’t help. They never planted outside. This is important.”

“Clarke,” Harper put her hands gently over Clarke’s, “Stop.”

Clarke looked at Harper’s hands, strong and capable and with her nails bitten down to the quick and cuticles bloody from picking at them. “I can’t,” she said. “I can’t.”

“Bring your sketchpad and your pencil case. You can make rough sketches on the way. Places you want to visit later.”

Irritation shot through her and she shook off Harper’s hands and put down her charcoal. “I’m not a child, Harper. You don’t need to talk to me like one.”

“Then don’t act like it,” Harper snapped. “We have to go back to the Mountain for psych evals. If we don’t, they won’t let us stay here at Jaha.”

“Fine.” Clarke bounced to her feet. “Right. Yes. I understand, in my head,” Clarke said, shoving an extra sweater and her sketchbook along with her data pad into a satchel. “Holding to the regular schedule for sessions is important. Even necessary. But, why do we have to go back to the Mountain? Why can’t the tests come to us? It’s mostly all online anyway.”

“I assume you don’t want me to tell you what you already know,” Harper said, turning to walk with her down the hallway to the new stairwell that led down to the ground floor of the Ark.

“Yeah,” Clarke made a face, “They can’t run all of the psych health exams at a distance and they don’t trust anyone at Jaha not to lie to them for us.”

“Hey, if they are as efficient as last time, we won’t have to stay the night. We can catch the last bus back here.”

“You know there is No Way,” Clarke emphasized the capital letters, “my mom is going to let me go without staying for dinner and,” she held up her fingers for the quotes marks, “ ‘family time’.”

Too late, she remembered that Harper’s family was dead. Lost in the environmental breach after Diana Sydney’s theft of the Exodus Ship.

“Sorry,” she said, as she impulsively reached out to clasp Harper’s hand. “That was stupid.”

Harper squeezed back for a barely discernable second, then pulled away. “Yeah. It was. But,” she offered Clarke a wry smile, “I understand.”
“Why don’t you have dinner and stay with us? My mom ended up with a ridiculously big apartment.”

“No.”

“Please.”

“No.”

“Okay.”

Once Clarke climbed on the small bus, she nearly turned and fled. Jasper Jordan was slouching in the far back, staring morosely out the window. He flicked his eyes at the newcomers, saw it was her, and went back to staring out the window, only now with ten times more rigidity and glaring.

Clarke ducked into the first seat, right behind the driver. Harper offered her a sympathetic glance, but went back to sit with Jasper. Clarke was lucky, she reminded herself, that Harper was willing to talk with her at all. Jasper refused to even look at her. Which was better, she reflected, than at least some of the alternatives.

According to Harper and some of the other delinquents who were there to see it, Jasper had actually tried to attack Bellamy after they’d burned the remains of the Mountain Men. He was wild with anger once he realized that they’d thrown Maya’s body into the fire along with all the rest, hadn’t separated her out for a more dignified burial. Only, Bellamy had exploded right back in his face, bellowing that if Jasper was too special a snowflake to shovel shit with the rest, he didn’t get to complain about how they took out the trash.

It went downhill from there.

Harper said she thought the only reason Bellamy hadn’t actually beaten Jasper to death was because, in his heart, he didn’t really want too.

That was why Bellamy had pretty much stayed away from Jaha ever since. That, and his new rank. He was back in the Guard. Brevet Major Bellamy Blake. Which put him in command of the patrols that were learning the shape and boundaries of Mt. Weather’s territory.

Or got sent him away on special missions. Like retrieving John Murphy, and whatever the hell it was he’d learned while off on his own adventures.

Figured, Clark thought resentfully, that Murphy would end up in a luxury bunker still fully powered up and stocked with booze, food, cigars, and reams of electronic entertainment while she ended up in a decrepit, cleaned-out cabin with nothing but a broken down stove and pile of punky wood for company.

Her evals went smoothly enough. She didn’t get a report of glowing mental health, but she passed. Dinner wasn’t looking so bad either. Her mom had thoughtfully avoided too much family time by inviting a half dozen other people and turning it into bit of a party. Marcus Kane was there, along with Raven Reyes and Kyle Wick, Megan Paez, who was an old friend of Clarke’s from school who’d somehow survived everything so far, David Miller, and, jaw-droppingly, Indra of the Woods Clan.

Indra was visiting her son. His recovery from the Cerberus program was not going well. He’d been enslaved as a reaper by the Mountain for almost six months, longer than any other survivor. That he was even alive at all was a testament to his strength, of body and mind. But, once off the drugs, he was a wasted shell of a man. It had taken a long time for him to recover enough to even stand on
his own. He refused to speak any English, or really, to anyone not from his own clan. Not even Lincoln, whom he shunned as an outsider. He refused to join other former reapers at Camp Jaha. In fact, he refused to leave the clinic at all. Indra visited as often as she could, which given her responsibilities in getting the survivors of TonDC ready for the coming winter, wasn’t very much. The rest of the time, he lay in his bed, staring at a blank wall.

When Clarke opened her mother’s door to find Indra standing there, clutching a wooden bowl holding a round loaf of bread, she’d frozen in shock. Indra looked equally stunned. Kane had come to their rescue, clapping his hand on Clarke’s shoulder, a hearty, “Indra, so nice to see you here,” falling from his lips. He drew them both inside, took the bread from Indra’s hands, put a drink in them and so thoroughly acted the host that Clarke began to suspect that as much as avoiding family time, there was some kind of diplomacy thing going on as well.

Indra, Clarke realized over supper, out of her terrifying warrior gear and eye paint, wearing a softly flowing blue tunic over matching trousers, was actually a strikingly beautiful woman. Her hands, not holding a knife or a sword, were long and elegant, as were her gestures as she spoke.

Clarke wondered how she’d never noticed that before. What with all the trying to kill each other shit going on, no doubt, she thought drily to herself.

Kane had steered the conversation around to the Ice Nation, but in the form of asking about customs and folkways, sharing one or two from the Ark for every morsel Indra choked out about the clans.

They were talking about marriage rules when Indra said, “It’s true that marriages and children can bind groups together. But it can also simply lead to losing your strongest children to rivals, strengthening them, weakening yourselves. You should be careful the Azgeda don’t take your Bellamy Blake for their own. He is very strong. He commands much respect among your people and ours. He would be a prize.”

“Do the clans force marriage for treaties?” Colonel Miller asked.

“No.” Indra shook her head firmly. “Children for us are too precious to be the result of force. But for the Azgeda, that would not be a problem, yes?” Indra smiled broadly. “Echo has already claimed him.”

“What?” Clarke exclaimed, before she’d had time to think better of it.

Everyone but Indra suddenly found something terribly interesting to look at on his or her plate. Indra looked around, confused, then at Clarke, sympathetically.

“Ah,” she said. “I apologize. That news should not have come from me.”

“No,” Clarke said, nodding her head at Indra, then turning to glare at her mother’s bent head. “It should not.” She included everyone else in glare. “Why didn’t anyone say anything? I don’t know how many times I asked how Bellamy was doing, and every single one of you looked me straight in the eye and said,” and here Clarke adopted a breathless, stupid, babyish voice, “Oh, you know. He’s had it rough. But he’s doing okay.”

Back in her normal tone she added, “I knew something was off, but figured I’d ask him myself when he got back.”

“Well,” Raven said with a winning smile, “that’s true? He has had it rough but he is also doing more or less okay. He’s just also ba-,” she coughed, “sleeping with Echo. Ice Nation. She’s the one
who held a man down so Bellamy could choke him to death with his bare hands, then later he let her out of the cages and gave her the keys for the rest. When the Mountain fell.”

There was an awkward pause.

Clark cleared her throat. “Is it casual, or serious?”

“Since they’ve been more or less joined at the hip for months?” Kyle said, “I’m gonna go with,” he made a thoughtful face, “not-casual.”

“It will be,” and Indra side-eyed Wick, “not-casual to her aunt, Queen Nia.”

After that Indra was comparatively forthcoming, explaining best she could how the clans handled things like puberty and sexual attraction, the fine distinctions they drew between exploration, sex for fun or stress relief, formal courtship and marriage, and something she translated, badly she assured them, as star crossed agony. None of them were completely fixed categories. Lincoln and Octavia had been the latter, for example, but seemed to be moving toward something more like what the clans accepted as marriage, she explained.

“And Lexa and Costia?” Clarke asked. “Where did they fit?”

Indra raised her brow. “She told you of Costia?”

“Yes.”

“Star crossed agony. From beginning to end. Intense young love torn apart by war and death instead of fading properly with time.”

“Does Bellamy know any of this?” Clarke asked, looking around the table. “Or is he riding into disaster blind?”

“I have no idea,” her mother replied. “I hope Lincoln and Matyn explained it all to him, if Echo hadn’t already. And we do know they were allowed to pass through to the east. They’re with John Murphy right now. All of them.”

“I spoke with Nathan last night, when they reported in,” Colonel Miller added, “and he didn’t mention any special concerns about their journey back. Losing Bellamy to the Azgeda, that would be a special concern.”

Raven cleared her throat. “I’m not sure we have to be that worried. Echo is,” she bit her lip, struggling for words. After a second or two, she said, “Echo is not really warm and cuddly, okay? Or even,” she shrugged apologetically in Indra’s direction, “very likable? I’m not sure how much Bellamy even, you know, likes-her likes her. Like outside of sleeping with her. Or how much she likes him either. She’s rude and dismissive to everyone, even him half the time, and he slings the shit right back at her. She won’t talk to anyone she doesn’t think has enough status. She’s queen of the mean girls big time.”

“She might just be shy,” Megan said, surprising everyone. “She’s always very polite at the library.” When everyone stared at her, she flushed but explained. “I work there, most afternoons. She hangs out there, a lot, when he isn’t around. Reads all kinds of things. Children’s stories, old science textbooks, National Geographic magazines. She was reading her way through a pile of Raymond Chandler’s work not long before they left.”

“Studying her enemies,” Indra said, nodding approvingly. “Well trained warrior, that one.”
“If we’re her enemies, why would she want Bellamy?” Kane asked.

“Because he is your champion. If he becomes hers instead, she wins.”

“He called her a bitch, to her face, in public, the morning they left because she was being such a dick to Monroe. If she wants him on a more permanent basis, she’s got work to do,” Raven said.

“Bellamy won’t abandon his people,” Clarke said. “Not now. Not ever.”

Indra shrugged. “If he comes back to the Mountain, you’ll know where his allegiance lies. So will the Azgeda.”
Debts Paid

Clarke pulled up a chair and sat down next to the bed. She didn’t wait for an invitation. Knew there would be none.

“Hello Duncan,” she said. “We haven’t met before. I’m Clarke. Clarke Griffin. Of the Sky People.”

Duncan, son of Indra, of the Woods Clan, ignored her, face firmly toward the wall.

“I met a man. When I was in the wilderness. He saved my life. One, last soldier from the Mountain survived the fall of Mt. Weather. Stolen bone marrow making his skin strong enough to hold him in the air outside. He was going to shoot me with his gun. He got an arrow through his eye for his trouble.”

Duncan ignored her.

“The man with the bow could have killed me next, but he didn’t. He wanted a life debt instead. I figured I’d die, alone in the forest, long before I had to pay. So I agreed. Only, I didn’t die.”

Duncan ignored her.

“And then, to my surprise, after I decided to live, after I returned, I learned that the man I have to kill to pay my debt was actually here. In the Mountain. Surrounded by my people.”

Duncan ignored her.

“Your life, Duncan, son of Indra. That is the payment that will clear my ledger.”

Duncan didn’t move, but she could tell from the way his body stiffened under his light blankets that he was listening now.

“I’ve killed a lot of people already. So, so many. A lot more than you, reaper warrior.”

She saw his jaw work, and smiled a little.

“Wanheda, he called me. Bringer of Death. I have a blade in my hand now,” Clarke flashed the small knife, not sure if he could see it out of the corner of his flickering eyes or not, but hoping he did. “So, one more kill. What’s the difference? And it will pay my debt.”

“Roan.” Duncan said, twisting his head slowly to face her. His voice was rusty with disuse. “Roan the shunned.”

“Yes.” She sat back, twisting the knife in her hands the way she had once seen Lexa do. ”That was his name. Roan.” Face like a hawk, bright blue eyes, pale, tanned skin, long brown hair. Completely unbraided. A surprisingly white smile. (Dental care having avoided, somehow, any connection to technology. It was not spurned by the clans.)

“I…” Duncan started coughing and Clarke pocketed her knife, poured him a cup of water from the bedside table, offered it to him. He took it, struggling to sit up without spilling. After drinking it all down, he handed her the cup back.

“I find,” he said, after a long moment of studying her, “that I do not wish to die after all. Not for Roan.”
“Then you will have to get well soon. Well enough to beat me in a fair fight. So I can say with truth that I tried, and failed, and then negotiate a new price.”

Duncan flicked a dismissive eye over her. “That will not take long.”

“Big words for a man who spends his days lounging around in a soft bed.”

“Big words for a little girl. Wanheda.”
Raven looked up when Clarke wandered into her workshop, looking dazed and slightly wild about the eyes.

“So. How’d it go?” Raven asked, already guessing that the answer would be something along the lines of, ‘really horrible.’

Clarke sank onto an empty stool, gazed blankly into space for another minute or two, then turned to Raven and said, “Oh. My. Fucking. Stars.”

“That well?”

“Ha!”

Raven smirked a bit as she bent back to her tools. “I thought you’d like being on the Council.”

“I’m not the council – thankfully! – I’m a new member of Kane’s general staff.”

Raven shrugged. “What’s the difference?”

“The council is still the governing body – though they’re calling themselves transitional right now. Figuring out how to draft a new charter, since the Exodus Charter is NEVER going to work. Their goal is to develop some sort of elected representative body, like a parliament, so the collective will of the people can be expressed and acted on.”

Raven would believe that when she saw it. As far as she’d seen, the Council liked being a secretive, semi-self-appointed, promote-from-within body. “But you’re not part of the re-write squad.”

“No! And NO THANK YOU! My mom was tearing her hair out last night over some completely wacked fight about voting systems.” Clarke shook her head. “I mean, I do get it – why it matters – but geeze. So glad I don’t have to be involved with that.”

Raven had the tiniest feeling that Clarke, busiest busy body that ever busied, wasn’t quite as glad as she declared, but let it slide.

“So you’re on Kane’s staff, not the Council.”

“Right. Kane is – and probably will be no matter what – essentially the secretary of defense. Kinda like he was on the Ark, only focused on outside threats now, not inside ones. That will be the new government’s job. Whenever they manage to get themselves up and running. In the meantime, Kane’s pretty much adopted wholesale old US/NATO army rules and regs for the remodeled Guard. He has a general staff now. I’m on that, cause he can just,” Clarke airily waved her hand, “make it so.”

“Doing what? You aren’t in charge of anything, are you? Or did they wrangle you in?”

“I’m not in charge of anything – which is good in theory, but sucks in practice.”

“Miss telling people what to do?” Raven teased.

“Yes! No!” Clarke raked her fingers through her hair and made a face, mocking her own indecision, and pushed herself to her feet, starting to pace as she tried to sort herself out “I mean, I
don’t want to be in charge. I ran away and lived in the woods for three months because I didn’t want people to look to me for directions, for survival! But…” she trailed off.

“But?”

Clarke scowled. “People can be so stupid sometimes!”

Raven laughed, bending back the project on her bench. “Your lips to Gaia’s ears, girlfriend.”

Clarke hmphed.

“So what are you doing for Kane?” Raven asked after a few minutes, when she realized Clarke was neither leaving nor talking.

“I’m his new military intelligence Advisor.”

Raven looked up in surprise. “You’re shitting me.”

“I shit you not.”

“Nice work for a rich kid.”

Clarke’s chuckle had no humor in it. “I’d rather keep my day job, thanks.”

Clarke’s current day job was her medical apprenticeship, and Raven knew she was good at it. Though there was something to be said for having leadership who were – in theory at least – committed to the Hippocratic Oath of ‘do no harm.’

“Okay,” Raven said, “but I swear you told me at breakfast that you were going to a Council meeting?”

“Yeah. As Kane’s Military Intelligence Advisor.”

“So what happened?”

“There is a proposal before the council to keep all Grounders completely off the mountain except on designated days. Once or twice a month only. They wanted me,” she pointed to herself, “new military intelligence advisor, to back them. I said no. Cue two hours of lobbying me – by calling me a stupid kid in every way they could think of without using those exact words – to change my mind.”

Raven could imagine that scene pretty easily. People presenting what they thought was a reasonable proposal. Clarke rejecting it out of hand as a stupid, short-sighted mistake, and getting more and more visibly impatient and dismissive the longer they argued, less and less careful to make sure she was calling the proposal stupid, and not the people who wanted it as well.

She doubted it was worth it, but thought she’d try anyway. “The Trikaru didn’t mess around when they came to warn off Camp Jaha. They crucified three people. Like nailed them to trees, crucified. Then they planed to torture Finn to death while we all watched and listened. They strung me up and tortured me on nothing but a wild accusation. Lexa spilled her own bodyguard’s guts on the ground for what was basically a policy dispute. Lexa then abandoned us all, taking a deal with the Mountain and breaking her deal with us, because she thought it was a better offer. People here are still frightened. And horrified. And they do not trust the Woods Clan. Any of the clans. For good reason.”
“Right,” Clarke said impatiently, “And that fear resulted in Anya being shot on sight. After that it was that much harder to get any kind of alliance together to go after the Mountain Men to rescue all our people. We need greater familiarity between all the groups, not less. We won’t make it, Raven, not without them.”

Clarke raised her eyes, and Raven could tell she was in for a classic impassioned appeal. Buckle in sweetheart, she told herself, it’s gonna be a bumpy ride. She didn’t actually know which of them she was talking too. Both, probably.

“Long term,” Clarke went on, building up steam, addressing the masses that were most definitely not in here, cluttering up Raven’s workspace, “we have to build trust. Build a home with and alongside the people who already live here. There just aren’t enough of us anymore to go it alone. Hard Science. We don’t have a breeding population large enough to sustain ourselves over time. Full stop. It’s make friends. Make babies. Or die out. Every sacrifice for the last three generations will be for nothing if that happens.”

Raven raised her brows. “So, you told people who are terrified of and disgusted by their neighbors to man up and love them.”

“Pretty much.” Clarke shrugged ruefully, and wouldn't meet her eyes. Recognizing the absurdity of it all.

“Lucky you got out of there alive, much less after only two hours.”

Clarke wandered back to her stool, dragging it over and sitting down across from Raven. Raven realized she hadn’t heard the worst yet.

“Someone else introduced a different proposal, one that broke up the meeting because my mom tabled it and adjourned the Council.”

Raven cocked her head. “What’s the proposal?”

Clarke raised her face to Raven’s. Raven thought Clarke suddenly looked a million years old instead of just barely eighteen.

“Under the terms of both the old Exodus Charter and of the Unification Code – they want the Council to expel and/or execute Bellamy, Monty and me. For War Crimes. Genocide, specifically,” said Clarke.

Raven’s tools clattered to the bench. “Oh, Clarke,” she whispered.

Clarke picked up a small screwdriver, twisting it in her hands. “The thing is, they have a case. A really, really strong case.”

Raven couldn’t think of a single thing to say. Hell yeah, they had a case. They had a case under every declaration of human rights since the middle of the twentieth century.

The entire surviving population of the Mountain was dead because of what Clarke had done. Willfully and knowingly. Genocide. Open and shut. Boom.

“I could have waited. Jasper wanted to try and negotiate something else, swore if we’d let him try he could save them.” Clarke looked up then, her eyes shiny with emotion. “But they had you on the table, drilling into you! Then my mom! If I had waited, if we had waited…”

Clarke bent her head again, but she did not cry. Raven began to understand why she had stayed
away. Maybe the real mystery was why she returned.

“You would have lost us,” Raven said. “We would have died. But maybe, you could have saved at least some of the Mountain Men in exchange. The many over the one. Humanity uber alles. Your own, as much as anyone else’s.”

It was something they had been taught since preschool. Sacrifice yourself to save the whole. Hell, they’d even play-acted it. Been taught to treasure all human life, not just those you knew and loved.

“Did I make the right call?” Clarke asked.

Raven had no answer.
Octavia waited until Bellamy vanished into the trees for his morning business – nothing like an extended camping trip for learning way too much about everyone, even one’s beloved, who did his at night, and Holy Mother why did she know all this? – to approach Echo.

Echo was vigorously grooming her horse, a handsome grey mare with a particularly beautiful mane and tail.

Octavia stopped by the mare’s head, catching her halter and pulling her in to rub her nose. She really was a lovely creature. The mare bumped Octavia’s chest, urging her to continue scratching behind her ears and under her forelock.

“I assume you heard last night’s big news,” Octavia said, as she finished saying good morning to the mare. She observed Echo from under her eyelashes, wanting to see her reaction. “Clarke returned to the mountain a month ago.”

The news would have been hard to miss, what with Monty whooping up a storm and dancing around Miller like an idiot.

Bellamy had greeted it with a tightening of his lips and a faint trembling in his hand as he held the satellite phone.

Octavia didn’t know whether to curse them or hug them for waiting until their little party was well back into the relative safety of Trikru territory to tell him that their missing Wanheda had finally dragged her sorry ass back to Mt. Weather.

“Yes,” Echo said, her eyes fixed on the brushes in her hands, swiping hard at some imaginary road dust. Her hands gripping so tightly Octavia wondered if she could leave fingerprints in the wood. “I heard.”

Octavia nodded, then said what she’d come to say. “Don’t make him choose.”

“What?” Echo looked at her in surprise.


“Why?” Echo turned fully toward her and met her eyes, her proud chin raised defiantly. “You don’t believe he would choose me?”

“No. Don’t worry. You got this one. If you make him, he’ll choose you. But,” Octavia paused, wanting to make sure she had Echo’s full attention.

“But what?” the other woman asked impatiently.

“But,” Octavia trapped Echo’s gaze firmly with her own, “he will never, ever forgive you for making him do it.”
Clarke told herself that she was just strolling over to the Gate Canteen to get a little nice, crisp, fresh air and a cup of strong tea. The Quonset hut holding the plateau clinic could get amazingly hot and stuffy, it really could. Space born and bred, Arkers were more than a little obsessed with making things Air Tight. Great for fuel efficiency. Less great for air circulation. And the cold December breeze did feel good on her flushed cheeks. She pulled her extra jacket close, happy to feel the sweat on her back beginning to dry.

If it just happened to be about the time Bellamy’s party should be arriving, well. Okay. That was just an accident. A coincidence. Nothing more.

“Hey,” Raven said, her voice so close to Clarke’s ear she actually jumped.

“Hey,” Clarke said, trying to recover her poise. “Don’t see you outside much.”

“I wouldn’t miss this, chica. Not for a million years.”

“Miss what?”

“The grand return, of course. Same reason you’re out here.”

“Am not.” And if she told herself that another thirty or forty times as she stamped her feet and blew on her too-hot tea from the Canteen, she just might believe it.

“Hey. Griffin. This is me, you’re talking to. And you were staring so hard at the road that a whole fucking army of reapers could have come up behind you and you wouldn’t have known.”

Clark grimaced in acknowledgement. “Whatever.” She looked at Raven, so bundled up that barely the tip of her nose was visible. That and her laughing eyes. Which had more pain lines around them than they used too. “How’s your leg today?”

“Sucks ass, just like always.” Raven shrugged. “Comon’on. You need back up. I’m here for you. So’s Wick.” Raven pointed with her cane. Clarke leaned around her to see Wick had grabbed a table for them. He waved cheerfully when he saw her looking. She frowned back, but let Raven tow her toward the empty chair.

“I don’t need back up,” she said as she took her seat.

“This is the second time in six months you’ve had to let the other girl have the guy. That has got to suck, so, so much.”

Clarke started to say she had no idea what Raven was on about, but was defeated by the sympathy in Raven’s eyes. “Okay. Yeah. A little. But, this time, I’m the one who ran out. No promises. No secrets. Nothing to regret. Only… a possibility of something. Just a chance. One in a hundred. Maybe. And then…”

“And then that possibility got picked up by somebody else.” Raven wrapped her mittened hand around Clark’s gloved fingers.

“Seems like it.” Clarke shrugged, then lifted her eyes to Raven’s. “I want to get the big, public, first-time meet up thing over with. Quickly as possible. Rip off the bandage.”
“Got a nice crowd for it,” Wick observed.

Looking around, Clarke realized she wasn’t the only one to have decided that this was the moment to take some air. The Canteen was suddenly swamped, people lined up four and five deep at the counter and the tables inexplicably full for a grey, overcast afternoon with a sharp east wind. The front porch on the barn was so full there were people sitting on the railings. There were well over a hundred people milling about, Arkers and clan-members alike. (She’d been trying hard not to the think of them as grounders. They didn’t think of themselves that way, having never had any reason to conceive of themselves in contrast to people who lived in space.)

“Everyone has been worrying,” Clarke said, some of her anxiety easing as she took in all the relieved, anticipatory expressions of the people around her. “Nice to see how much they value him.”

“Bellamy’s our champion.” Raven sing-songed drily, though her eyes were dancing with mischief.

“Just because it sounds absurd, doesn’t make it not true.”

Clark winced at her snappish tone, but Raven just smirked at her and Wick laughed.

Whatever Raven might have said next was lost in a sudden swirl of commotion at the point where the road down the mountain met the plateau. A group of eager children had posted themselves there, waiting. Now they were yelling and bobbing in excitement, just too far away for their words to be made out. One of them broke from the group and sprinted for the canteen crowd. As he drew nearer, they could all hear his high, eager cries. “Horses! Horses coming up the road!”

And now Clarke heard them too, even felt the rapid thudding echoing hollowly under her feet: a group of horses cantering fast up the hard-packed, frozen dirt and gravel of the entrance road.

The first horse appeared, blowing hard from the climb, puffs of steam rising from his flared nostrils. Then two more, a cluster of five or six, and then another four riders strung out slightly behind, holding up the rear.

The lead horse pulled into a tight circle, spinning to the side of the road, the rider moving easily with the prancing, agitated mount, apparently counting noses, making sure that the rest of the party was following. Once the last of the horses was onto the plateau, the first rider urged their horse into loping canter, caught up to the center, then back the front of the group, settling into the lead as the whole party drew nearer to the main gate.

It looked… like an old movie. Some grand, medieval fantasy epic, maybe. For a misty, cloudy moment Clarke even half thought the riders were wearing cloaks, billowing dramatically in the wind.

She blinked and realized they weren’t. Just heavily fur-trimmed coats, and decidedly un-medieval rifles slung on their backs and shotguns hung on their saddles. A couple of them were even wearing salvaged sunglasses against the flat glare of the afternoon. Bellamy was riding near the center now, just in front of the rest. Clarke recognized his size, the shape of his shoulders under his huge fur collar, almost a shawl, his dark hair, and even from a distance, his smarmy, self-satisfied smirk. It was Bellamy. And damn, but did he look fine on a horse.

And was also milking every possible drop of drama from the situation. Charismatic bastard.

He grinned and waved.

It was like catnip for the crowd. A ragged cheer went up from the throng assembled near the
canteen, got stronger after everyone realized they weren’t alone in their excitement, bouncing back
from the stable, building to a rolling wall of sound.

“Bellamy’s home!” She heard the phrase falling like raindrops all around her, tried to tell herself
she hadn’t just said it inside her own head, in more or less exactly the same tones of awe and relief.

They were close enough now that Clarke could appreciate that the group were mounted on the
most handsome horses she’d seen yet. The horses the Ark had purchased or traded for with the
Woods Clan tended to bulky bodies with large, rectangular heads and rounded noses. The kind of
horses Bellamy’s group must have ridden out on.

These new mounts were about the same size as all the others she’d seen, but they were from clearly
superior stock. Leaner, more obviously muscled bodies. Cleaner, more elegant shapes to their
heads and legs. Narrow hocks, small neat hooves. Pert, sharply curved ears set alertly above broad
foreheads and wide, intelligent looking eyes. Their slightly concave faces tapering to narrow,
flaring muzzles.

These were Ice Nation horses. Another gain (or debt?) from this venture.

The riders were finally slowing to a walk, and Clarke could shift her focus to the rest of the party.
Lincoln and Octavia, looking more than ever like some sculptor had been given the task of
capturing idealized human beauty. Octavia had scored an utterly gorgeous fur hat, because
naturally she had, which she wore like an Empress’s freaking crown. Monty Green (who’d gone
with them to work his magic on the computers and other equipment Murphy had stumbled on),
looking more butch than Clarke would have ever dreamed possible. Nathan Miller, serious and
soldierly, his father’s son, two other Arkers she didn’t recognize, and a half-dozen clan members
who’d accompanied them along the route. Clarke understood that at least three of them were
former reapers who didn’t want to, or couldn’t, go home. They’d apparently attached themselves to
Lincoln as some sort of honor guard.

And she was there too. Echo, sister-child of Nia, Queen of the Azgeda. The new diplomatic
representative of the Ice Nation. Bellamy Blake’s once and current lover. Clarke couldn’t look too
closely yet. Her first impression wasn’t much more than dark hair and dark eyes.

Marcus Kane, no slouch himself when it came to orchestrated drama, must have been hovering
nearby, because he strode out at just the right moment, a group of uniformed guardsmen arrayed in
his wake. They came to a formal halt just in front of the main gate, David Miller at his shoulder,
her own mom at his side, wrapped in a massive, luxurious fur stole they’d found in storage.

Proud parents welcoming home their sons. Long live the King and Queen under the mountain.

Raven leaned close, “I don’t know whether to applaud or barf.”

Clarke and Wick burst out laughing, drew surprised looks, and tried hard to stifle themselves.

Bellamy rode right up to the welcoming party, stopping just a meter or so back from them. He
swung gracefully off his horse, and Clarke took a moment to appreciate that he’d learned to do it so
well. On his feet, he stood and saluted Colonel Miller. She was too far away to hear their words
clearly, but some sort of formal military dialogue seemed to be going down.

Then Kane hugged him.

She exchanged eye rolls and gagging sounds with Raven, even as she appreciated Kane’s very
public show of support; ‘genocide’ still whispering in her head.
Bellamy turned and gestured and the rest of his party began to dismount, handing off the reins of their horses to several of the dozens of eager children who’d swarmed them once Bellamy stepped back from Kane.

Bellamy was turning to speak to the other riders, when his gaze fell on Clarke.

For a queer moment, Clarke thought that time stopped, everyone else froze, and the air stood still.

Then she shook herself out, forced herself up, her feet into motion and a huge smile onto her face. Well. Her smile wasn’t all that forced. She really, really was damn glad to see him.

“Bellamy!” She cried, half striding, half jogging toward him, Raven’s whispered, “Go get’em tiger,” buzzing in her ears.

His grin was uncertain, but real all the same. When she hugged him, he wrapped his arms tightly around her without any hesitation at all.

They pulled back, and talked right on top of each other, “I-I am-am so-so glad to-o see you!”

Which made them laugh, and then he nodded and said, “You first, princess.”

“I am so glad to see you,” she repeated, a grin so broad she could feel it splitting her face. He was back. He was real. He was solid under her palms. Very solid. More solid even than she remembered. She dropped her hands, suddenly too conscious of the heat of him.

“I’m glad to see you too. We were all worried.” He hadn’t let go, and now he looked down at her with concern, like she might break or vanish or start to cry.

“I know. I…,” she shrugged, still didn’t have the right words.

“It’s okay.” He dropped his hands as he looked around, then back at her. “We’ll talk more later. Now I want to introduce you to Echo.”

She must have been there the whole time. Standing right beside him. Clarke took another deep breath, smiled broadly, stepped in and embraced her. She felt the other woman go rigid with surprise, then, hesitantly, wrap her own hands around Clarke’s shoulders for a quick, awkward hug.

They let go almost immediately. Stepping back, Clarke let her hands slide down Echo’s arms until she could capture her hands. Looking up, way up – and how come no one had warned her how freaking tall Echo was? – Clarke realized that Echo was a stunning woman. Because of course she was. Slim, elegant, her face too commanding for mere prettiness, she radiated self-assurance and grace. Clarke suddenly felt short and round.

Clarke smiled warmly, gently gripped her hands and said, “It is so good to finally meet you. I want to thank you so much for all your help. Without you, we could never have gotten a team to Murphy, or retrieved his intelligence. We are all in your debt.”

Echo nodded gravely. “Thank you.” She sounded surprised. “I, too, have looked forward to meeting you, Clarke of the Sky People. And you ended our ancient enemy. Talk of any debt between us is meaningless measured against the destruction of the Mountain Men.”

Clarke didn’t have a response ready for that comeback, but fortunately her mother stepped into the breach.
“Echo. Welcome back to Mt. Weather,” Abby said, with one of her more brilliant smiles. “We’ve prepared an apartment for you, suitable for your station as a representative for your people. Let me show you. I’m sure you’re ready to get inside, where it’s warm.”

Echo nodded, then turned her head to catch Bellamy’s eye. He touched her elbow reassuringly. “Go on. I’ll find you later. I have to go debrief with Colonel Miller and Kane now.” He nodded at Clarke as Echo followed Abby, mouthing ‘see you later,’ then he moved toward Kane.

Their little knot broken up, Clarke was turning away, just about to sigh in relief that the worst was over, when she nearly collided with the unmoving form of Octavia Blake.

Who was staring fiercely at her: arms crossed, hip cocked, hilt of her sword rising menacingly above her shoulder, a portrait in unrelieved hostility.

After shocking Clarke speechless for long enough to make her point, Octavia cracked a slow grin, then started to giggle. “You should have seen his face. Like he got a last second pardon just as he expecting to be offered a choice between the noose or a firing squad. Terror turning into salvation in the blink of an eye.”

Clarke laughed too; relief flooding through her, making her feel light headed and giddy. “Oh man. I know that look. He looked just like that when Jaha pardoned him all those months ago.”

Octavia pulled her into a hard embrace, whispered, “Thank you,” into her ear, the edges of her hat brushing so softly against Clarke's cheek, then as quickly as she arrived, slid back into the crowd. Monty claimed Clarke next, and by the time she looked around for Octavia again, she had vanished into the mountain.
Debrief

“And that’s it, sir,” said Bellamy, “Something with a lot of electrical power survived the cataclysm, and it still has some. What it wants to do with the power, we don’t know. But it’s running drones on the northern side of the waste, and along Long Island Sound.” He drew his finger across the map spread out on the small conference table. They were gathered in Kane’s offices, filling in the details from their brief nightly reports from the road.

“And to the west?” Kane asked.

“We never saw any, and we were looking.”

“Also,” Kevin Hu, Guard sergeant and electronics specialist who had come with them, spoke up, “Someone, or some thing, built a large solar field on top of the waste, obviously after the cataclysm, but it was abandoned a long time ago. Probably because the parts couldn’t be replaced or replicated. Murphy thinks somewhere around here…” he pointed to a mark on the map.

“So. Threat analysis, Major?”

Bellamy still had to shake himself, whenever Kane used that rank when talking to him. Somewhere, he was sure, Shumway, that fucking bastard, was laughing mockingly.

“Whatever it was, when it unleashed or helped unleash nuclear war – and sir, you’ll have to watch the tape. So creepy the way he calls it ’her.’ But since then, it’s not clear it ever had the power reach all the way south or west across the waste. None in the Ice Nation have any history or stories that sound like anyone had that kind of tech or electrical power after the upheavals.”

Kane turned to Alice Hong, his chief information officer. “Is there no hint in the mountain’s files that they knew about it?”

“None, Sir. At least not in living memory. They weren’t afraid of using tech, obviously, and they were focused entirely on escaping to the surface.”

“And the City of Light?”

"We’ve searched for that too. They were aware of it, but only as a grounder myth. They dismissed it as a classic salvation story. Couldn’t really follow up, anyway, so…” she shrugged.

“Actually,” Bellamy cleared his throat, “most adults in the Ice Nation appear to reject it as a fairy story too. Think the southern clans are – well – childish, or maybe, excessively credulous, for believing in it. A piece of the old world to tease children with, but no more.”

“Interesting.” Kane frowned thoughtfully. Then after a beat, he shook himself and asked, “And, no word or sign of Jaha?”

“None.”

“But, sir,” Lt. Midori Zimmerman, weapons specialist, spoke up, “Murphy is absolutely convinced he’s still alive. That there is something out there, and that what ever it is, Jaha found it.”

“Why?”

“It sounds crazy, especially coming from a cynical, jaded conduit-rat like John Murphy,” she
waved her hands apologetically, indicating her own understanding of how bizarrely unshakable Murphy’s certainty had been, “but, he says Jaha is touched. By, well, something. God maybe. Or ‘Her.’ Anyway. He swears Jaha can’t die until he’s accomplished….whatever it is he needs to do.”

“And in the meantime, Mr. Murphy will stay in his,” Kane turned to Monty, “what did you call it? ‘Really Sweet Bachelor Pad?’ and try to make contact with the Desert Clan and the Nomadic Clans, on our behalf as our designated representative north of the waste.”

Monty grinned. “It is sweet. You should see the motorcycles.”

“I think he’s looking for someone sir. Someone he met on the way.” Nathan Miller said, frowning at Monty. Monty just grinned back at him.

Kane blinked in surprise, then his lips curled in wry humor. “John Murphy, cynical, violent, criminally inclined, conduit-rat John Murphy is looking for a girl?”

Bellamy shook his head, feeling the same thing even after more than a month of travel to get home. “Her name is Emori. Nomadic Clan. And yeah.” He grinned at the ironies of it all. “He’s looking for a girl.”

“If we make it through, actually have descendants survive into the new world, what stories they will tell about us all!” Kane said in amazement, an expression of amused wonder on his face.

After a beat of two of staring off into space and contemplating the strangeness of the world, he shrugged, and turned back to Officer Hong. “We need to dig back into the mountain’s files. Computer storage and anything hard copy that they saved. To the beginning. See if they ever reconstructed what happened. What went wrong. And if they didn’t, do it ourselves.”
Bellamy leaned back against the counter in the plateau clinic. It was closed for the day, but he’d sent Clarke a brief text and asked her to wait for him there, he’d meet her after he came in from riding patrol. He’d returned nearly five days ago, but he was utterly consumed by Kane and her mom the Chancellor and his duties and Echo and everyone else who wanted a piece of him, which was pretty much literally everyone else as far as Clarke could tell. The tension of not speaking to him privately had begun to eat her alive. He must have been feeling the same to have actually scheduled this.

“I don’t know how to start,” he said.

Clark looked up and met his eyes, telling her nervous heart to shut the fuck up. To Bellamy she said, “I should start. I owe you an apology. I should never have left. Not like that. Never tried to take sole responsibility for something we both did. Never suggested that my pain was somehow more pure, or intense or meaningful than anyone else’s.”

“No, you shouldn’t have,” he agreed, solemn and serious. His best ‘disappointed dad’ face. One he hadn’t used on her before. It was just as irritating as she’d thought it must be.

She barreled on anyway, determined to stick to her script. “I left you to be strong for everyone, to protect them. All by yourself. While I crawled into a hole and licked my wounds. And you were strong. You held our people together. Got them moving again. Started them building, working for the winter. For the future. You have so much to be proud of. And I know how hard it must have been.”

“I am. Proud. Thanks, though. Accolades from the princess are always welcome.”

Clarke gave him a sharp look. There was that faint hint in his voice, that not-quite-a-sneer, prole-to-rich-kid attitude, which even now got right up her nose. “Really? I’m trying to apologize here.” She took a deep breath and said, slowly, “I’m very sorry I ran out on you. That was a shitty thing to do.” She raised her brow. “Better?”

He smiled at her, in the way that let her know he’d just scored a point. “Yeah. Better.”

She folded her arms defensively and scowled at him. Not that he didn’t have every right to make her feel bad, but she’d really hoped he wouldn’t. “Good.”

He stood up and crossed the room to look at an old-school human anatomy chart she’d found on a trip to the archives and brought out to hang on the wall. “So,” he asked, “Wanna tell me where you went?”

“Like you don’t know?” It sounded sharper and more frustrated than she intended, but she didn’t take it back.

He came over and hoisted himself up to sit on the examining table, sitting across from her. “We knew when you crossed back into mountain territory. The border is very heavily watched, electronically and in person. But that was almost four weeks after you walked away.” He let the worry and concern and anger he must have felt then color his words. Clarke felt (yet another, thanks mom) stab of guilt.

“Oh,” she said. “Those four weeks.” She hadn’t really answered this question, even when Kane asked, claiming her confused emotional state prevented her from really paying attention to her...
surroundings or remembering it afterward. She’d lied. But she owed Bellamy more than she owed Kane. A lot more. “I went to the drop ship first, scavenged what little I could find. Others had been there before me.”

Bellamy nodded.

“Then I headed for the art supply store.”

“I thought you’d been there. I went looking, after we reclaimed the drop ship two weeks out.”

“After that I wandered west – opposite direction from everything I knew. I didn’t want to run into anyone.”

“What did you eat? How did you stay safe?”

“I had three good knives on me when we left the mountain. I found string at the art supply store. I cut reeds, bark. Wove it together. Made some snares. It was the end of summer – there were plenty of berries and roots around. I slept in the day, usually. Tended a fire at night…” she trailed off, remembering. Remembering waking up next to a few smoldering embers on a damp grey dawn to the face of a coldly enraged Lieutenant Carl Emerson, former Mountain Soldier, current vampire living on stolen bone marrow, his shaking handgun pointed straight at her head. Watching him fall a heartbeat later, an arrow protruding from his eye. She shivered and pushed it back. “I was mostly trying not to think.”

“How’d that work out for you?” he sounded sympathetic and desperately curious, all at once.

“Terribly. I kept seeing that green ball, rolling across the floor in that fancy dinning room.”

He nodded, exhaling deeply. “Me too.”

After that he didn’t say anything more. Just sat. His hands hanging loosely in his lap, his feet dangling off the ground. They were quiet for a long time. It was oddly comfortable.

Eventually she said, “I was pretty hungry most of the time. Pretty spacey as a result. Even looked for those damn nuts.”

“Find any?”

“Oh yeah.”

He quirked an eyebrow. “Good trip?”

“Nope. Bad, bad, bad. Which totally didn’t stop me from trying it a second time. And a third. Until I ran out.”

He laughed.

“You?”

“Get high? Yeah. Turns out they grew prime weed here, and then processed it into hashish. Used it to buy influence in Polis. And they had proper equipment for making liquor. So I got drunk a few times, too.”


He gave her another one of his ‘I just scored a point’ looks, but he also answered her question
without further dicking around. “Kane put me back in the guard the day you left, gave me a brevet appointment to Major. Next day we returned to the Mountain to clean out the bodies. Make it our own.”

Clarke nodded, but her throat closed up so she didn’t say anything. She knew, from hearing about it from everyone else, what a sad, gruesome, horrible job that had been. She didn’t know how Bellamy’d been able to stand it, because they weren’t all strangers to him. There were people he knew and liked and trusted among the dead. And children. Children he had wanted desperately to save. She wasn’t brave enough to ask him about it. Maybe never would be.

“After that,” he was saying, “I’ve been mostly on patrol. Learning the land, learning to be a better leader, hunter, soldier. Training. Drill. Or working construction, here and Camp Jaha. TonDC.”

“TonDC?”

“I helped with rebuilding their main meeting-house. Seemed the least we could do.”

Clarke nodded again. It was, literally, the least they could do. God, did she regret not figuring out how to handle that situation in her own way. Not let Lexa bulldoze her into doing what she knew – knew – was wrong. “I’m glad you did that. It meant a lot to Indra, that we did that. She actually said as much. In words and everything.”

“She definitely takes stoicism to a new level.”

They fell silent again after that. The one, last thing they weren’t talking about suddenly very heavy and awkward between them.

He must have felt it too, because he hopped off the examining bed and wandered over to her desk, tossing off, super-casual-like over his shoulder, “Oh, and I started hooking up with this girl from the Ice Nation. One of the ones we rescued from the Mountain Men.”

“Ah.” She actually smiled in relief.

He looked at her over his shoulder. “Her name is Echo.”

“Mm,” Clarke couldn’t help shaking her head at him, though she was plenty happy to play along. She appreciated the sideways approach he’d found. He was good at that. Her more usual, kick-down-the-door style didn’t always work out so well. She asked, “Like her?”

“Most days,” he stuck his hands in his pockets and shrugged. “Which is better than at first, when I only liked her most nights and almost never during the day.” He smirked a bit at that, half bragging, also fully aware that it didn’t paint him in a particularly good light.

She chuckled obligingly, but wondered, in her heart, what the hell he’d managed to get himself into this time. It was an open secret in the Ark gossip mill – which was as intense as ever – that he wasn’t sleeping in his assigned quarters. He was, more or less, living in Echo’s diplomatic suite.

“She seems like an interesting person,” she offered.

Which was such a cop-out. Anyone was interesting if you put your mind to it. Though, of course, Echo was interesting, as a subject. She was everything everyone had said. Arrogant, brash, direct well past the point of rudeness, she had no time at all for anyone she didn’t regard as important. But her eyes, her eyes were deep and dark and a whole lot swam far below the surface. Her watching had weight. Clarke could feel it.
“Yeah. Turns out she is. Prickly as hell until we hit the road. Being outside, away from the mountain, and she relaxed a lot. Especially the closer she got to home. Got easier to be around.”

“What did she think of Murphy?”

“Never met him. She stayed in their capitol.”

“Interesting she got the job to come back to Mt. Weather.”

“She’s a warrior, skilled with horses, and a member of the Queen’s family. And she already knew us, and speaks English better than most of her people.”

“Indra said she was studying us as potential enemies.”

“Why do you think Midori Zimmerman went with us on the road north? She’s got a photographic memory and excellent drafting skills. She’s made a rough map of every settlement we went through, and a really detailed one of their capitol city.”

“Why is there so much distrust among the clans?” Clarke demanded. It was a rhetorical question, and one that she knew didn’t really have an answer.

“My opinion? I think the Mountain Men engineered it. Keep their flocks unbalanced. Too busy squabbling with each other to face their real enemies.”

“That doesn’t make it not real,” Clarke objected. “Not fifty years in.”

“No. It doesn’t.”

“But,” Clarke said, “That’s got to complicate things for you. For Echo. The Azgeda, they have got to have their own agenda here and we don’t really know what it is,” she kept her voice light, working hard to follow Bellamy’s lead in this. Friend to friend, talking about relationships. Nothing more. And then the sense of her words hit her. “Are you and Echo actually spying on each other? For your respective people?”

He met her eyes, but his were unreadable to her. “I think, it’s better to say, we use each other to gather the intel that we both hope will keep our peoples working together, toward a better future for all of us.”

“Oh Bellamy,” she breathed. “That has got to be weird as all fuck.”

“Yeah,” he made a face. “It is.”

“Does that change anything? About how you feel about her?”

He just looked at her. She flushed. That had been a really stupid thing to say. Which somehow led to her blustering out, “I don’t know what would have happened, if I had stayed.”

“Neither do I, princess.”

“I’m sorry, though. I wish,” she rushed on, trying get through the emotional marsh without sinking, “I wish we could have found out.”

He shrugged. “I wish I hadn’t thrown Raven’s radio in the river.”

After a shocked beat, she laughed at her own shock. “You’re kind of an ass, Bellamy Blake.”
He just grinned a twisted grin at her. “Wanna come have dinner with me and my girl?”
“Echo!” Abby couldn’t keep the surprise out of her voice. This was not a woman she had ever expected to see again in the Mountain’s clinic, short of some kind of life or death emergency. Her first, and second, experiences had, after all, been pretty terrible – each in their own way. But Echo was seated on the examination table in the consultation room, completely uninjured and not visibly ill. “How can I help you today?”

“I understand you can confirm pregnancy?”

“Yes. We can.” Somehow Abby was completely taken aback, even though like everyone else in Mt. Weather she was fully aware of Echo’s months long affair with Bellamy Blake. A situation she’d never quite been able to reconcile with her belief that Bellamy and her daughter had some kind of … something, going on before… Before. She forced her attention back to her new patient. “Is this for you? Do you think you might be pregnant?”

Echo’s expression suggested she found Abby rather dim. “Yes. I believe that I am pregnant.”

“How far along?”

“I’m not sure. I never had a monthly cycle, not since …” she shrugged and didn’t finish her sentence. “I thought it was because of the loss of blood, and my illness after, and that it would return in time.”

“But it hasn’t.”

“No.”

“Were you employing any contraception?”

Echo looked at her blankly.

“Were you doing anything, or using anything to prevent pregnancy?”

“Oh.” She looked down at her lap, then up again, a faint – and entirely unexpected – blush staining her high cheekbones. “No. It seems foolish now, but I thought I didn’t need to worry until after my cycle returned.”

In her head, Abby wondered why the hell Bellamy Blake hadn’t been more proactive about this, even though she knew that wasn’t entirely fair. On the Ark they had used long term, reversible, or permanent for those who wished, contraceptives aimed primarily at female fertility. He wouldn’t necessarily have thought it through at first. That Echo wasn’t from the Ark, and what that could mean. And then later, man-like, decided it was all taken care of.

Abby nodded in understanding. “That’s usually true, but, not always. And given that, lack of a monthly cycle is not necessarily a reason to assume you’re pregnant now. So, other than the obvious,” and she smiled warmly to make it clear she wasn’t trying to be dismissive, “what makes you think you might be pregnant?”

Echo must have felt it anyway. Or been telling herself that for days or weeks. She raised her chin. Good Lord, but this girl was prickly.

“All the little things,” she said. “I feel swollen. In the late afternoon I feel ill. I just feel… off,” and
her mask slipped, and for a brief second Abby saw only a worried young woman, facing the upending of her life as she had known it before, her feet set on a new path.

Abby saw no reason to doubt that Echo could be pregnant, and this was a pretty conventional list of symptoms. “For how long?”

“Since just after we left for the north.”

“Did you check with your own healers, while you were home?”

Her mouth drew into a firm line. “No.”

“No?”

And her chin went up again. Damn, but this girl was wired so tight.

“I understand you have tests,” Echo said. “You can tell if the fetus is sound. Healthy. Developing as it should.”

And a whole bunch of things began to become clearer. “Yes. We do.”

“And you can perform an abortion if it is not. One that would protect my chance to try again. In the future.”

“Yes.”

“Then do it. Please.”

Abby was almost positive she had never once heard Echo, sister-daughter to the Queen of the Ice Nation, say please before.

“The tests?” Abby asked, just to make sure.

“Yes.”

“Are you concerned about anything in particular?”

“One in every four or five babies among women in my family is damaged. Most are too damaged to live. The mothers of the damaged babies, the birth often kills them too. I do not wish to die for a mutant child.”

Looking at that rigid jaw and anguished eyes, Abby’s heart pinched a little, realizing how terrified Echo must have been, given those odds, and how determined once she realized there was another way. Indra and Lexa both had said something to the effect of being surprised that Nia had sent her relatively untried young relative to fill such an important position. They were worried it meant Nia didn’t take an alliance seriously. Now Abby suspected that instead, Echo had worked and schemed and fought to earn the job, all so she could sit here and have this one conversation, one on which her future and even her life could quite possibly depend.

“Have you told the father?”

“Bellamy is the father.”

There was a challenge there, Abby knew. Faint, but she heard it all the same. She let it go. The last thing they all needed was her meddling with someone else’s star-crossed love affairs. Not even her daughter’s. Which were entirely mysterious anyway.
“Have you told him?” she asked.

“No.”

“You ought to. Among our people, fathers expect to be involved.”

“It is not his decision what I do with my womb.”

“No. It is not. That is your choice alone. But you wouldn’t be pregnant without him either. So he should be told.”

“Fine. I will tell him. After I know.”
Reconciliations

“Hello” Clarke said.

“Hello,” Lexa replied.

Clark turned away. She couldn’t bear to look at her, remember how much she’d liked her. Admired her. Wanted to learn from her. How to be a strong leader in this benighted world of hers. How to be a girl in charge. Wanted her approval. Wanted.

Or maybe only how much she’d wanted to like her. To want to want her.

So she studied the main room of the rebuilt meeting place of TonDC instead. The most neutral spot anyone could think of for a formal first meeting for Clark and Lexa. First since the mountain fell, anyway.

The room, the building, had the fresh construction look she’d gotten used to in front of Mt. Weather on the plateau. In Camp Jaha. It was easy to see that Arkers and Ark equipment had helped with the building.

It still seemed very strange and out of place in TonDC, a new log building, with squared corners and glassed windows and planked floors and solid wood doors. Though she’d been assured that the design was proposed and approved entirely by Trikru and was not something imposed on them by the Ark.

Lexa was seated in a chair toward the side of the big open room. She was arranged to receive visitors, but she was not seated on her portable, twisted-roots throne, nor was she raised on dais. There was even a table to her side, with a pitcher and some tumblers and leather portfolio case, as though she could turn and write letters or something if the spirit moved her. Possibly it was her version of an accommodation to the new world order.

“I understand you’ve been asking after me?” Clark said, wandering away to examine a fresh hanging on the wall. No reason to pretend she was the one who needed the formal audience.

“Yes. Once I heard you’d returned to your people.”

Six weeks ago. She’d returned six weeks ago. Seemed Clarke wasn’t the only person who wanted time to collect herself. She walked on to look at the next hanging. They were fabric and found item collages, bits and pieces put together to form abstract patterns, almost mosaic-like in their intricacies. They reminded her a bit of Indra’s battle tunic. She wondered briefly if the patterns carried significance beyond ornamentation. She would ask Lincoln later.

“I needed some time to clear my head. After the fall of the Mountain,” Clarke said. After she murdered three hundred and fifty or so people. All to save her tattered remnant of forty-six. And her mom. And gain a fortress to shelter her people, only she hadn’t realized that was what she was doing at the time, so it didn’t seem like it should count in her defense.

“I am very glad to be seeing you again,” Lexa said.

Maybe it was just Clarke’s imagination, but she thought Lexa raised her voice hopefully on ‘again.’

“Maybe.” Clarke turned just enough to hold Lexa in her field of vision. She looked – and sounded – sincere, but then, Lexa was very, very good at the whole poker face thing. “But you didn’t expect
to see us, to see me, again, did you? You believed you’d sentenced me and mine to certain death.”

“Yes.” Lexa raised her chin. “I make no apologies for that.”

Clarke shrugged dismissively and turned to the next hanging. “I wouldn’t accept them anyway. Your decision was stupid. Very stupid. But, you’ve been paying a high price, and will continue to pay it for a long time.”

Lexa’s voice got harder, “I did what was…”

Clarke spun and cut her off, her own voice louder and angrier than Lexa’s. “You made your word and your clan faithless. You broke our alliance. You sold us out to our enemy for your own gain. Your word has no value now. No Clan, no Nation will be able to trust Trikru. Trust that you won’t sell them out when the time comes. Certainly not mine!”

“That’s not…”

Clarke talked right over her, drawing close enough as she spoke that by the end she was staring down at the Commander, taking the rare advantage of a height difference in her favor. “And you cheated your alliance of their opportunity to take what you said was rightfully theirs. Blood had no blood that day. Turns out that isn’t some great, sacred principle for Trikru after all. I killed one of my own to clear what you insisted was your clan’s blood debt. Only it turns out, it was all a lie. Just some sick game. When it mattered, you quit the battle. Turned and ran, just as the tide had turned and final victory was within your reach! Our reach!”

“I could not have known that!”

Clarke shook her head, suddenly furious all over again. “Yes. You could. You had to! How could you not know? Your ancient enemy had rolled on his back and bared his throat. He actually offered you a deal. The very first such offer in more than fifty years – fifty years! – of struggle. And instead of cutting his throat, you chose to take his offer. To extend his life. Preferring the world you knew to the one that would come with his defeat.”

Clarke didn’t have to act her disappointment, her contempt. It filled her heart and her mouth.

“It was a good deal.” Lexa set her full lips in a sullen line. “For us. For the twelve clans.”

On anyone less formidable it would have looked a hell of a lot like a pout.

Torn between a desire to slap her, and storm out the room, Clarke raged on instead.

“He was a lying vampire,” Clarke flung at her. “He would not have honored it. Your people were cattle to him and his. Not respected enemies.” Clarke stepped closer still. Put her hands on the arms of Lexa’s chair. Lean in to hiss, “Beasts. Herd animals. Prey.”

This close she could smell the faint scent of cedar and sweet grass, wood smoke and lavender that was Lexa’s alone.

Clarke straightened up and rocked back half a step, curling her lip into her best, dismissive sneer. “You don’t honor a deal with prey. You just bait the trap with it.”

“No!”

thought your people were less than fully human. He played you for a fool, and you let him.”

She almost spit the last words, not sure if the venom dripping from her tone was aimed at Lexa, at Wallace, or at herself. Probably all three.

“You think you know our world!”

“No. I don’t. I don’t know shit about your world. Just like you never bothered to find out anything about mine. But it doesn’t matter. The mountain fell. The world changed. We have to deal with what is, in the now. Yesterday is gone.”

“We observed you carefully, learned more than you think!”

“You observed us for less than three weeks before you attacked us. You decided in your pride that because we were children, and new to the woods, we must also be stupid and helpless. We are neither. Three hundred of Tristan and Anya’s warriors died for your mistake. And Tristan. And Anya.”

Lexa glared, but said nothing.

“Then you thought our parents – the people who birthed us, trained us, taught us to survive in conditions you can’t even begin to imagine – would be easy to frighten. Instead our leaders walked empty handed into your villages. Wanting to talk with you, to learn from you, trade with you. Wanting to tell you who we are and why we landed uninvited on your doorstep, running from our own fate with no way to return. Wanting to reach some kind of accord with you. You threw them in pits. And watched them. And tested them. And still never once asked them a question. Not one question!”

It was something Kane had mentioned more than once. His frustration with the Grounder’s rigid certainty that they already knew everything they needed to know and anything they didn’t know wasn’t worth knowing anyway could occasionally send him into fits of speechless fury. It could take him hours to walk it off in the tunnels and passageways of the mountain fortress.

“We know we have much to learn. But your pride has cost you more than you had to give,” Clarke said.

Lexa looked away first. She bowed her head and closed her eyes, and when she opened them at last she looked down at her empty hands. “All the old truths they taught me – from the time I was less than two years old, when the spirit marked me for leadership – those truths, those rules, they’re useless now.” She raised her face to look at Clarke. “You smashed the world, when you fell from the sky. All of you.”

“I know.”

Lexa let out a long, shaky exhale, her ‘leader’ mask gone. Now she was wearing her ‘I’m just a girl like you’ look. Lost. Alone. Breaking under responsibilities too large for her. Clarke felt herself wanting to cross the tentative bridge and sit next to her. Take her hand and tell her they would get through this.

Lexa raised her eyes to Clarke. “I have no idea what I’m supposed to do next.”

That wasn’t what Clarke had expected. Utter helplessness.

Clarke started to laugh. And then laugh and laugh and laugh. Her legs gave and she half sat, half collapsed into another chair set along the far side of the room, furthest from Lexa. It was minutes
before she could get her hysteria under control.

Finally, she was able to say, “None of us know, Lexa. We’re all making it up as we go.”

It was Lexa’s turn to stand, to come closer. “I would like us to work together.”

“For the sake of both our peoples, I really fucking hope we can.”

Lexa was so close now that she could drop to one knee. She looked up into Clarke’s face, her eyes glowing with intent and meaning. “I would like us, Clarke, you and me, to work together. I have hoped for weeks, since learning of your safe return, that you would feel the same.”

Clarke met Lexa’s gaze head on; let herself feel the tidal pull, the deep tug of mutual admiration and latent desire that was still there. Then she reached inside and ripped it out.

“Since the last time I turned you down, you left me and mine to die what you expected would be a horrible, painful death? Sure. Fine. I’ll fuck you. Whenever and wherever you want. Now, maybe? Here in this room?” She started to shrug off her jacket.

Lexa reared back, dismayed horror in her eyes. “NO! That’s not…. what I meant. What I wanted.”

“Isn’t it? Because it sure as fuck sounded like that.”

“Clarke. Please! There was something there. Between us. I know it.”

“I don’t. There was only… potential.”

“I hope that there can be potential, again.”

“I have no idea, Lexa. And you have no right to expect anything else from me.”
“What the hell is that?” Wick squawked, as Bellamy dumped a sack of rusty metal parts onto the floor of the big workshop he shared with Raven and the other mechs who’d survived groundfall. “What kind of shit are you pouring on my floor, man?”

Bellamy shrugged, and toed the pile. “Guns.”

“No. Absolutely not,” Wick said.

“Those?” Wick came slightly closer and peered at the pile. “That is a pile of corroded shit parts. Not guns.”

“A couple Trikru kids showed up at the Exchange today. Swore these were from an old stockpile, hidden away decades ago, once the word came down from their Commander at the time banning guns. They wanted to know if we could fix them. I said I’d ask.”

Two gangly, nervous teens, maybe fifteen or sixteen years old, neither of them sporting more than one small tattoo, clutching a sack of old disassembled rifles with way too much hope and excitement in their eyes. He’d’ve bet that they didn’t have any battle-kill scars either. Not that he asked to see them, though he’d learned he could. As an adult with certified kills of his own, he had the authority to ask for anyone’s bona fides. Not that he could imagine ever doing that.

“No. Absolutely not,” Wick said.

“Don’t be such a whiny baby, Wick,” Raven called from her side of the large room. “You can’t tell what’s salvageable just by looking. You have to actually pick it up.”

Wick raised his hands, waggling his fingers, and his eyebrows, as he said, “I can’t risk my talented hands on crap like that.”

“Who says you have talented hands?”

“You did. Last night.”

The other mechs in the room hooted their appreciation for the exchange, and Bellamy wondered again what the status of their relationship actually was.

It was clear enough that Wick was head over heels in love with Raven, but her feelings weren’t nearly so easy to judge. She’d grown cautious with her heart, thanks to that ginormous ass Finn Collins. Bellamy used to try to feel bad for the guy, but had lately given up the effort. He’d pretty much trailed disaster in his wake no matter where he went. As far as Bellamy was concerned, their lives were better off without him. Not that he’d ever let Raven or Clarke know that’s how he felt. As for Raven and Wick, he knew they didn’t room together, and that they were close. And that was it, and all he really needed to know.

Raven glowered at Wick from under her eyebrows. “Yeah, well, use your talented hands on that pile, or don’t expect to use them on me.”

“I already poked through it,” Bellamy told them. “I think there might be some useful bits in there. Enough to put together at least one or two that might work.”

“Sure it won’t cause an international incident if you give Trikru kids guns?” Wick asked, squatting down and sifting through the pile.
“No. But it’s not my job to keep Trikru kids in line either.”

Thank God. They were feeling change in the wind, too, and it was winding them up higher than any drug on the market in Polis.

“I’ll talk to Kane and Clarke before I give them back,” Bellamy said, “if that makes you feel any better. But it’ll be good to know, either way, if they have stashes that might actually yield working weapons.”

“You got a point, and,” Wick stood up, an assembled carbine in his hands, “they have the parts for about five broken-ass urban assault rifles. Missing screws and pins, barrels full of rust, and some of this plastic isn’t going to take a lot of use before it cracks, but, the important parts are all here.”

“Definitely a good news, bad news situation,” Bellamy said, scrubbing his face and suddenly exhausted by all the meetings he was going to end up in, thanks to this. “Thanks, man. Set them aside for now and I’ll get back to you about how we’re going to handle it.”

Bellamy was headed out the door when he realized Raven had appeared at his side. Damn, but could she move quickly and quietly when she wanted too, even with her cane and leg brace.

“Speaking of good news, bad news,” Raven said in a low voice, “the Azgeda Ambassador was down here the other day.”

“Yeah?” All thoughts about stupid Trikru teenagers and their rusty new toys fled, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

“She asked me for a tutorial on how ultrasounds work.”

“Oh.”

“Anything you want to share, champ?”

“Nothing you haven’t already guessed, Reyes.”

“Congratulations?”

Bellamy couldn’t quite stop the smile. “Yeah. Thanks.”

“And, speaking of international incidents, I really thought the first Grounder-Skaikru baby would be your sister’s.”

“Yeah. No. Her implant works just fine.”

“Oh,” Raven said, and then, “Ooohhh. You forgot that Echo wouldn’t have one, didn’t you.”

He shrugged. He wished he could say he forgot, but that would imply he’d ever thought about it in the first place.

“So, why is she so concerned about understanding ultrasound technology? Which, by the way, she picked up quickly. And wanted to know if you could use it on horses.”

“Birth defects, miscarriages and maternal mortality are all really high on Earth, in her clan. And her real vocation is horse breeding and horse-trading. Like, for real. You should see her arguing values with the Trikru horse dealers.”

“So,” Raven paused delicately, “is everything okay?”
“Yeah. It is, actually. So far. We’ve even finished the full genetic counseling workup with Dr. Griffin. The baby should be… fine.” He shook his head, still feeling about a thousand contradictory things.

“Does Clarke know? Because, please God, don’t make me keep this a secret from her.”

“She does. No worries. Gossip away.”

He could see her fighting to ask all sorts of questions. Questions she swallowed because she was a good friend. “When do we get to meet the rugrat?” she asked instead.

“June, probably just before midsummer.”

“Does this mean some kind of wedding-type thing is in your future?”

“No. Or, well, it’s complicated.”

“International complications?”

“Oh, yeah. And all kinds of weird-as-shit grounder hangups about pregnancy and childbirth and approved bloodlines and official parentage. Not Echo’s,” he hastened to add, “she’s more than ready to dump all that woo for modern childbirth, but her people probably won’t be.”

“Woo?”

“I called it barbarism the other day, and got a mini-lecture from Kane about respecting organic customs that respond to cultural and environmental stressors and avoiding the role of cultural imperialist. So now I’m calling it ‘woo’.”

Raven goggled at him. “What?”

“His academic major was sociology and anthropology.”

“That…” she trailed off, walking on with him in silence for a while. “That explains so much about him.”
“Clarke?” Abby said her daughter’s name quietly, willing to let Clarke decide if she wanted to talk now or not.

Clarke was curled up with a book in the corner of their living room sofa, the lamplight she was reading by turning her hair bright gold.

The amenities of the mountain fortress, the furniture, the linens, the rugs and lamps and dishes, worn but far less so than similar things on the Ark, paled in comparison to the wealth of books and art and music and film. The Arkers fell on these things, starved for fresh material after consuming all that they had so thoroughly it felt thin and tired and so – used. Clarke, like so many of them, had made visits to the library part of her daily routines as she devoured new authors, new ideas, new ways of thinking or reading or telling a story.

Clarke looked up, “Yeah, mom?”

Abby decided this was invitation enough, and took the opposite corner. Pulling her legs beneath her and a throw pillow into her lap, and her recognition that it was a form of armor didn’t slow her down, she asked, “Have you spoken with Bellamy recently? Outside of staff meetings, I mean?”

Clarke cocked her head, her eyes glinting with the same exasperation as when she was six and caught an adult out in a less than clever approach. “You mean, did he tell me he knocked up his grounder girlfriend? The Azgeda Ambassador? Yeah. A couple of days ago, actually.”

“Oh.” Abby realized that Bellamy must have told Clarke within a day of learning the news himself. She hadn’t realized they were still (again?) so close. She looked carefully at Clarke, a hundred half formed questions dying in her mouth. She finally settled on, “You okay?”

“Sure. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Abby didn’t say, because I saw the way he looked at you? Because I heard the way you said his name? Instead she said, “You two built up a lot of pretty intense history in a really short time, and you work closely together now, on Kane’s staff. This could change things up a bit.”

Which she knew was a massive understatement. Babies had a way of changing everything, especially in the short term.

Clarke shrugged. “I changed things by leaving. I took the space I needed to deal in my own way. I have to respect everyone else’s too.”

Abby knew Clarke was not healed and that she had not ‘dealt.’ She’d repressed, deflected, and finally settled on stubborn denial. Abby had no idea how to help her. She couldn’t see the wounds, but she knew Clarke was still bleeding. And a baby was not a bandage. Not for anyone. Not even for Bellamy Blake.

“I don’t think he anticipated this,” Abby said.

“No. He didn’t. Neither did she,” said Clarke.

Which had done nothing to dim his smile, when he heard his child’s heartbeat for the first time. It was like the dawn breaking around the earth, the brightest star in a star-filled sky.
“I’ve seen you eating supper with them a few times. In the mess hall,” Abby said.

“He wants me to know her. So I’m trying."

Abby blinked back a rush of tears. How did we teach you so well? To save everyone but yourself? “She’s…” Abby fought for a word, “an interesting young woman.”

Clarke barked out a sharp laugh. “That’s the same thing I told him! What a total cop-out.”

“I don’t mean it in a bad way!” Abby said.

She liked the girl. Liked her spine of steel. Liked her refusal to put anyone else first.

Abby said, “It’s just, we don’t have a lot of positive words to describe someone like Echo, but none of the non-positive ones are fair at all.”

“Sure we do. Smart, focused, goal-oriented, survivor, warrior.”

Abby had forgotten what it was like to be shamed by your own child’s generosity. And she had to listen to way too much gossip – presented as formal complaints – in her position as chancellor. “True.”

“And she excellent taste in men.”

“Men?”

“Have you seen Bellamy with his shirt off?” Clarke asked, then whistled and fanned herself in an exaggerated appreciation for hotness.

“No.” Abby shook her head. She had only seen him fully clothed. But she had seen enough to guess at what Clarke was missing. If she wanted it still. Do you, Clarke? Abby wondered. Would you ever tell me if you did? Would you ever tell him? “Clothes on only.”

“Yeah. Well.” Clarke raised her hands, indicating her inability to help Abby with this terrible oversight.

“It’s not that hard to imagine,” Abby said drily. “I still have eyes, thanks.”

Even fully dressed it was clear he had extremely well developed musculature and a flawless swagger.

They laughed together.

“I think she’s doing a good job of learning to be a diplomat. She’s not very gracious, yet, but she listens and she learns. She’s a good negotiator.” Clarke said, being very gracious herself.

“She managed to be appointed Ambassador, ahead of more experienced Clan members who must have wanted the post,” Abby said. “That was no small feat.”

“I know. Bellamy told me.” Clarke looked at her then, her expression softened with worry. “She’s afraid of dying.”

“Many, many grounder women do. Too many.” Abby said.

“Is there any reason to be concerned?”
“The clans’ obstetrics practices are shrouded in a lot of mystery. Echo, as a maiden – which I gather means ‘not yet a mother,’ rather than ‘virgin’ – officially doesn’t know much at all. The ritual knowledge is shared later, after quickening. I haven’t had a chance to corner Indra, but from my conversations with some of the Trikru women who have come to us for genetic counseling, I think they’ve gone old school. Birth is solitary, and unattended. It’s a test. Of mother and child.”

“That’s horrible!” Clarke exclaimed, pity and revulsion in her eyes.

“And wasteful. Part of why their maternal and neonatal death rates are so terrifyingly high.”

“But if she stays here? Delivers here?”

“I believe that’s what she wants. I’m just not sure how flexible the rules are, if she gives birth far from home. If that’s even allowed for someone of her status.”

“If she can’t stay?”

Abby raised her hands helplessly. “She’s young and resilient.”

Echo’s heart had been damaged by the acute anemia brought on by her treatment at the hands of the Mountain Men. Her body was a network of scars from battle and bloodletting. Abby was – professionally concerned. But that was not her story to tell.

“Bellamy will totally break that rule,” Clarke said, iron certainty in her tone.

Abby remembered his smile. It was brighter and more beautiful than the sun. “Yes.”

“How important is the rule?” Clarke asked, her brow creased in thought.

“I think... very important.”

Clarke looked up at Abby, faint astonishment in her eyes. “We could end up triggering the war over a baby’s birth.”

When did you become we for Bellamy Blake’s child? Why must everyone else come first for you? “Yes,” Abby said. “We could.”

“Damn.”
“Hey,” Bellamy said, walking into the small barn on the plateau. “I got your message.”

Echo looked up from her perch on an upended bucket. “I didn’t mean for you to come up here.”

“I don’t mind. I brought supplies.” He held out a covered basket and two blankets.

The corners of her lips pulled up into the very smallest of smiles. “What’s in the basket?”

“Lentil stew, brown bread, apples and coffee.” He lifted up the covering to show her.

“You brought enough for two,” she said, her smile growing larger.

“Mmmh. Hold this,” he said, putting the basket in her lap. Then he spread the blankets out on top of the pile of fresh wood shavings. “I knew you weren’t going to come in to eat, so I brought supper out for us both.”

“You didn’t need to bother. I have a sandwich for later.”

“I wanted to.” He nodded at the chestnut mare, pacing restlessly in the indoor ring, pausing now and again to kick at her swollen belly. “How’s she doing?”

“Contractions started about an hour ago. This is her second foal, if the dealer was telling true stories. So, maybe another hour or two until her water breaks. Maybe longer. Probably longer. Mares like to deliver in the deep night.”

“How often have you done this?”

“Dozens of times, on my parent’s farm.” Her parents, he’d learned, had been horse breeders. Her older half-brothers had taken over the operation after her parents passed away. “But this is my first, alone.”

“That makes you the closest thing to a horse vet on the mountain, Ms. Ambassador. I’m glad you’re here.” He sat down on the blankets and held his hand out, “pass me the basket. I’m hungry.”

She handed it over, asking, “What is a ‘vet’?”

“It’s short for ‘veterinarian.’ Animal doctor.”

“You lost yours in the earthfall?” she asked.

“Never had any. The only animals we had on the Ark were descendants of lab animals. They allowed all but a very few to die. A few amphibians – frogs mostly – were kept for testing, and guinea pigs – for eating. But none of those are very complicated biologically.”

She rose and came over to join him on the blanket. “The stew smells good.”

He smiled as he passed her a covered bowl. He’d noticed her nausea usually let up around sunset, and she was ready to eat a few hours after that. He’d shown up right on time. “Eat up, it’s better
while it’s warm."

She nodded, already digging in. They ate in easy silence after that, their legs stretched out before them, shoulders just brushing. It reminded Bellamy of being on the road. She’d finally had something to do each day, something she was very good at, managing the horses, chivying their new riders, tending to their minor hurts and strains: the horses, not the riders. It made her happy and comfortable, almost gentle. Even with him, which was a surprisingly welcome change of pace.

Not that it ever stopped her from driving her elbow right into the gut of a recalcitrant horse, or an impertinent rider. If the situation seemed to warrant it.

Once they’d returned to Mt. Weather, she’d continued to take a proprietary interest in the Ice Nation horses she’d helped them buy with a brick of quality mountain hashish. Kaf, the Clans called it.

Once he got used to her, the new head horse handler at Mt. Weather – chosen because he was willing to take the job – realized she knew a lot more than anyone else did. So he started calling her for everything that agitated him – from major injuries, Bellamy had helped hold down a horse that a cougar had attacked while Echo stitched him up – to ‘the horse is just acting weird and I’m worried.’

They’d been watching this mare for two weeks now, waiting for her to go into labor. The head horseman and Echo had been switching off nights for the last few days. Tonight was Echo’s turn.

Bellamy wasn’t surprised that tonight would be the eventful one. Horses liked Echo.

“Trade you half my sandwich for the rest of your stew.” Echo’s voice interrupted his musing.

He looked at the amount of stew in his bowl and the sandwich in her hand, then handed it over. “Deal.”

As they sipped their cooling coffee, Echo said, “See the way she’s moving? She’s about to lie down. Help the foal shift into the proper position.”

“How come it’s okay for you to learn to help a horse, but no one helps a woman give birth?” He didn’t intend to sound petulant or accusatory. He did anyway.

“How come it’s okay for you to learn to help a horse, but no one helps a woman give birth?” He didn’t intend to sound petulant or accusatory. He did anyway.

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“As they sipped their cooling coffee, Echo said, “See the way she’s moving? She’s about to lie down. Help the foal shift into the proper position.”

“Horses have us to look out for them. We have no one but ourselves.”

Whatever he might have said next was short-circuited by the heavy sound of the mare lying down.

“See? I told you.” Echo grinned smugly.

It transformed her face, from forbidding to glowing. So he leaned in and kissed her. She kissed him back. One thing led to another, and soon he was asking, “How much longer do we have?”

“Enough,” she said, and reached for the buckle on her pants.

He woke to her hand on his shoulder, shaking him roughly. “I need your help. The foal is stuck.”

And so he learned, under the direction of the Azgeda Ambassador, his lover, the mother of their unborn child, how to help turn a foal inside a mare.

It was exhausting, filthy work.

Somewhere in the middle of it all, when Echo was stripped down to her bra and pants, armpit deep
inside the mare, fighting contractions that made her grunt and her eyes water to loop a string around a foal’s jaw, both of them covered in blood and indescribable muck, Bellamy realized he could love her, if he let himself. He just had to let go his tight grip on his own heart. So he did.

When it was done, the afterbirth delivered and examined, the foal on his shaky feet, and they’d cleaned themselves up the best they could in the stable, they collapsed back onto their blankets. They watched the small, brown foal suckle at his mother’s teat until the head horseman arrived.

“Ugh,” Bellamy said to Echo. “You have gross shit in your hair. Let’s go take a shower.”

Chapter End Notes

When I was a horse-mad girl-child I loved James Herriot. I read my copies of his books to tatters.
“Is this a party? Or a ceremony?” Lincoln asked.

“Both, I guess?” Octavia answered. “It’s a party first, and then a ceremony. And then a little more party.”

“I didn’t realize you had ceremonies.”

“Wait until Unity Day – we totally have ceremonies. And usually parties with the ceremonies.”

“When the twelve stations joined together to build the Ark, right?”

“Give the smart boy an A, and send him to the head of the class!” Octavia beamed up at him, and he leaned down for a kiss.

“Oh, God, hurry it up, will you? My nuts are freezing out here!” Monty complained.

They were half way across the not very long strip of hard ground from the gate to the meeting hall. It was December 22, 2149, and the top of Mount Weather was a very cold place to be.

It was the night of the winter solstice, their first on the ground, and the Arkers were coming together to celebrate. Even all the guard shifts had been shortened to two-hour rotations, so that everyone who wanted would have a chance to participate as much as possible. In fact the only ones who couldn’t make it at all were those manning Camp Jaha and the Drop Ship. They were having their own small gatherings.

They could have used the big ballroom inside, but the Council had extended an invitation to Lexa and the Woods Clan, inviting them to be part of the Ark’s most (only?) important winter event. Ordinarily, with rare exceptions such as Lincoln or Echo and escorted guests or visitors, Grounders were barred from the fortress itself.

Besides, Octavia thought, it was nice to be out in the black. See the night sky in its fullest display. Octavia hadn’t realized it at first, in those early frantic weeks, but it was actually possible to miss the deep black sky. Miss starlight and moonlight. Miss the stars.

She knew she wasn’t the only one born and raised on the Ark who liked the night. Who felt like she could breath more freely, more deeply, secure in the vastness of space around them.

The Meeting Hall wasn’t nearly big enough, of course. It had been ringed with heated tents, for food and hot drinks and a respite from the pounding musical beat coming from the open doors.

They shouldered their way inside, pushing through until they could find a spot where they could watch the dancing. Someone had rigged up mirrored balls and strobe lights. The small stage was covered in sound equipment, a skinny kid named Diesel manning the board.

The place was swarming with Arkers, and it looked like a hundred or so Grounders had taken up the Council’s invitation. About half of them were familiar faces for Octavia, former patients, recovered reapers who’d never really left, or regular visitors to the Exchange. The rest were from TonDC and even a few from Polis.

Indra was there, standing next to her son, who had finally decided to leave his bed. They were at one of the small, tall tables with Chancellor Griffin, Kane, Echo and Bellamy, and other muckety
Lexa had come as well, surrounded as always with her retinue of advisors and bodyguards and, a date?

“Lincoln,” Octavia tugged on his sleeve. “Who’s that girl, holding hands with Lexa?”

Lincoln looked, then shook his head. “I don’t know. From Polis, I guess.”

“Is she Lexa’s date?”

“You know, when you’re interested in someone and trying to get to know them, so you invite them for coffee or to take a walk? Or to a party?”

“Oh. That practice doesn’t have a name, but I know what you’re talking about.” He shrugged, “but that’s not really an option for the Commander. Her companions tend to be… I guess you’d say, members of her staff.”

“Like… paid?”

“Is Bellamy paid to be on Kane’s staff?”

“Well, first of all, Bellamy is not literally sucking Kane’s dick, if that’s what that girl’s job is, but yeah. We all get paid. Even you.”

“We do?”

“Yes! In credits that count toward housing, food, time off, wardrobe, goods at the Exchange.”

“I’ve been paid… in these credits?”

“Yes. Lincoln! I was with you when Sinclair explained this all to us.”

“I understood that we received food and housing and other supplies in exchange for our labor.”

“Yes. We do. But, everything is calculated in discrete units of value. Credits. So that if, say, one person gets a crappy room or a crappy pair of boots, because we’ve run out of all the good ones, they get more of something else. So that way everyone knows that for the same level of work, they get the same credit in return.”

“Do our room and our food take all our credits?”

“You are just now asking me this question?”

“I didn’t understand it was a question that could be asked.”

“No. We have a positive balance. Savings.”

“You will have to show me how this works. Tomorrow.” He nodded at the dance floor and grinned at her. “I think I’ve figured out that there aren’t any special steps.”
Clarke danced.

She had been restless and grumpy about going to the Solstice Party. Dreading the crowds, the noise, the heat, Lexa.

Oh yes. Once she knew that Lexa was definitely planning to attend, AND bringing a retinue, she dreaded it like whoa.

But her mom chivied her into going with her own special blend of guilt, expectation and love.

By the time she arrived, the dance floor was already crowded, the beat was intoxicating and she could step in and lose herself.

So she did.

She danced alone. She danced with others, in a more or less ‘you’re dancing near me and we are sometimes making eye contact’ sort of way. But she didn’t go to them. They came to her.


It wasn’t just the beat that was intoxicating. There was plenty of fresh moonshine. Real live whiskey, actually. Fresh mash carried up from a branching segment of the Woods Clan that farmed corn and rye in the Roanoke Valley, to the southwest of Mt. Weather.

It was unlike anything they’d had on the Ark, and it went down so smoothly – after the first few bitter mouthfuls.

At some point someone who loved partner dancing shoved Diesel off the stage and took control of the consoles. Clarke wasn’t as good at these dances, but she gave it her all.

She danced with Captain Miller, Harper, Nathan, Mr. Jordan, Mrs. Green, Wick, Raven, Octavia, Lincoln, others she didn’t know. She even danced with her mother and then Kane. She danced with anyone and everyone as they passed her hand-to-hand under the sparkling lights of the dance floor. Until she found herself dancing with Bellamy. Who of course knew these dances as well as the other free-form kind. Stupid, irritating renaissance asshole that he was. Ass. Who had a nice ass.

She’d seen him early on, dancing with his sister. Absolutely did not notice his ass then. No siree, she did not. She saw him out of the corner of her eye once more after that, after the music changed. He was guiding Echo through some of the simpler steps. Of course she picked them up quickly, moving gracefully under his touch. Clarke looked away, and when she looked for them again they were lost in the crowd.

Lincoln also proved to be a fast learner and to the delight of everyone who witnessed it, not only did he dance with Chancellor Griffin, he even got Indra out on the floor.

She did totally notice that Lexa hardly danced at all, but nevertheless seemed to be constantly standing just off the floor in Clarke’s field of vision, her hands all over some Trikru girl Clarke had never seen before. She did not meet Lexa’s eyes, but she did dance a little harder, maybe a little closer to whoever she was with at the time.
Yet it somehow was a surprise to her when once again she spun into different hands, and knew them. Big, broad, long fingered hands. Calluses and scars. Warm hands. Bellamy’s hands.

“Hey Princess,” he said as he spun her into his chest. “Having fun?”

“Yeah,” She smiled, pleased to discover it was even true. Mostly true. True enough. “I am having fun.”

“How many trips to the booze tent have you made?”

“Um,” she frowned, now acutely aware of how muzzy and lightheaded she was. Dancing was really thirsty work after all. And she hadn’t made hardly any trips. She’d sent various people to do it for her. “I’m not sure?”

“That’s about what I thought. When this song is over, come with me to get some food and coffee, yeah?”

“They sent you on an intervention?” She tried not to feel slighted. That he’d only come to dance with her because he was the one nominated to tell her she was drinking too much.

“No. I tried to get Wick to do it,” he grinned at her. “But he’s huge coward.”

She didn’t want to feel more mollified than she had felt slighted. To know it was Bellamy who’d noticed and wanted to do something about it. She did anyway.

“He blew up the dam. While he was still in it. He’s not that much of a coward,” she said.

“Telling the Wanheda to lay off the whiskey for a while is way more terrifying that blowing up a dam. Even if you are still in it. Trust me.”

“Hmph.”

“Song’s done. Come on.” He took her hand, holding it securely in his own as he wove them through the crowd.
When he got to the gate, Bellamy realized he’d left his heavy outer coat behind. He debated heading back to Echo’s quarters to retrieve it, but decided to do without. The distance to the Meeting Hall wasn’t that far, and keeping track of his coat in the crush was a pain.

Besides, the freeze-your-nose-hairs cold would wake him up. Solstice was always an endurance test, and he had a duty shift coming up and then he was standing for the reading.

It had been a long night already. He and Echo had attended the formal dinner with the Chancellor and all the other visiting dignitaries, including Indra and Lexa and their retinues, and various important members of the Ark governing body. Clarke, he had noticed with some envy, had successfully blown it off. She’d claimed that as she was only an advisor, she wasn’t high-ranking enough to be needed. Kane had started to argue, but then the Chancellor had cut him short, reminding him that Clarke and Lexa in the same room didn’t necessarily bode well for anyone. Clarke had come back from her meeting with the Trikru Heda nearly sparking with fury, but had refused to say anything other than ‘our current truce is fine.’

Bellamy hadn’t been able to blow off the formal dinner. He was a member of Kane’s staff and a ranking officer in what was, by default as well as design, the military force of Mt. Weather. Echo, of course, was there as the Azgeda Ambassador. They weren’t there as a couple. But everyone – at the dinner, in the mountain, who visited the mountain, probably people who only knew people who visited the mountain – knew they were together anyway. The world was small and gossip was fast.

Unlike Indra and Lexa, Echo didn’t have a retinue, something he’d never really thought about before. Tonight wasn’t the night to get into why, although he filed it away to pursue later. But she could go toe to toe with Indra and Lexa in the haughtiness department and win, so it didn’t seem to matter much in the end.

The dinner in the Meeting Hall was another one of Kane’s productions. Meticulously calculated to show just enough wealth and comfort to be hosting the Trikru as equals, but not show too much. Not enough to make the prize of the mountain look worth the enormous effort it would take to win it. Or one worthy of too many regrets.

The menu alone had taken Kane a week to nail down. Fresh lettuce, apples and carrots. No citrus, no pineapples, no berries. The Mountain hydroponic floors produced those things too, but Kane didn’t want to show them off. Cabbage, rutabagas and winter squash. Bread rolls made from potato flour. Things that could be stored for winter – though theirs actually weren’t. Fresh meat that had been provided by hunters in the last few days, not taken from the Mountain’s poultry or hog stocks. The after-super sweet was cookies made with rice flour.

The rough tables and benches in the Hall were merely temporarily banged together from fresh boards laid along sawhorses and log rounds. No linens other than napkins. The decorations were all from trees. Leaves, pine boughs, pine cones, branches with red berries, holly. Bellamy thought this last touch would be wasted effort, but then Indra of all people noticed it. It allowed Kane to talk about his mother, and her spiritual faith, and then ask about theirs. Because he’d brought up his mother, Indra actually felt compelled to offer up a few things. Sly Bastard.

It was also easy to take down the tables and benches and clear them away for the dancing afterwards.
Echo was stiff as hell at first, bewildered by the informality of it all, but gradually got into the music, especially with Octavia’s and Lincoln’s encouragement. After a few hours of vigorous dancing, Echo was so tired and sleepy she had actually been weaving on her feet. It was obvious enough that one lady even came up to ask him – very kindly – if maybe Echo had had a little bit too much to drink.

He’d smiled rather grimly and assured the nosy old bitch that Echo was fine, merely tired. And pregnant, although he said that last part only inside his head. It would be public soon enough. Then he took Echo home. She’d protested, but not very vehemently. He was pretty sure she was asleep before she hit the pillow. He’d kicked off his boots and stretched out beside her. Just for a minute, he’d promised himself. Forty-five minutes later he was sprinting for the Meeting Hall and wishing he’d at least brought a hat.

The first thing he saw, once his eyes adjusted to the glittering lights, was Clarke. Still dancing, but more wildly than before, more unsteadily, and whoops, Morales had to move really fast to keep her on her feet. She was a lot unsteadier than she’d been when he left with Echo.

Falling down drunk would not be a good look on their hero.

He nudged Wick, tried to get him to intervene.

“Man? Are you insane? No, I am not going to go tell Clarke she’s cut off.”

“She likes you.”

“No. She likes Raven and Raven puts up with me.”

“I’m standing right here,” Raven said. “I like you just fine.”

“Would you go get her?” Bellamy asked Raven.

“And have her knock me on my ass, so I can trip half a dozen people with my cane? Thanks. No.”

“How much has she had to drink?”

“Did you appoint me to Clarke babysitting brigade, only forget to actually tell me that?”

“No.”

“Go get her yourself. Dad.”

“Ha ha not at all funny, Reyes.”

He headed for the blond head glowing in the center of the crowd.

In the food tent, he loaded up her plate with cold venison sandwiches and the French fries that the commissary team was producing by the bucketful, then planted her at a table while he went to find her coffee.

When he returned, she was sucking down the food so fast he worried it would all come straight back up again. A year of janitorial duty had given him a keen appreciation for the consequences of drunkenness. Fortunately, he had a distraction ready to hand.

“Clarke?”

“Hm?”
“Why is Lexa flaunting her new girlfriend at you?” He gestured with a slight jerk of his chin and a shift in his eyes. Lexa and several of her retinue/body guards had entered the food tent not long after they did, and taken a table nearby.

“Oh,” Clarke said as airily as possible, “I don’t know.”

Bellamy just gave her a look.

“Oh,” she beckoned him closer, leaning over the narrow table so she could whisper. “She might have kissed me once. I might have kissed her back. A little. Once.”

Well, well, well, he thought, wasn’t that an interesting piece of new information. It shed light on at least some of Clarke’s fury after their meeting a few days ago. “When was that?” he asked.

“Oh. In her camp tent.” She sat back, curling her lip in disgust. “Before the invasion that wasn’t. It was kind of a surprise.” She looked at Bellamy then, her eyes open wide with wonder, and he realized she was completely in earnest when she said, “I didn’t know she saw me like that.”

“So saw you like what?”

“You know. As someone to kiss.”

Clarke’s skin was still flushed from dancing, her hair had fallen out of whatever style she’d put it up in, her eyes were a little glassy with whiskey, her voice was particularly husky from hours of singing along with the music and she looked so worried that he didn’t know whether to laugh or swear. To keep himself from saying something incredibly awkward like, ‘I’ve always thought you looked like someone I’d like to kiss,’ he said, “She really kissed you?”

“Yes! Is that so hard to believe? That someone might want to kiss me?”

“No.” He held up his hands and shook his head, wondering why on earth Clarke thought that about herself. “Not hard to believe at all.”

As soon as he framed the question in his head, though, he had the answer. Finn Collins. Screwer-over of fantastic girls who deserved way better than his tepid and self-serving attention. If the guy weren’t dead, it would have been Bellamy’s pleasure to put him on permanent scouting duty. Far from the mountain. Let him freeze his balls off for the rest of the winter. Every winter. For the duration.

Not that he’d ever imagined that Commander Lexa would want to kiss Clarke, or that she would actually do it. Or that Clarke would like it.

Clarke was still looking at him, her expression rather like that of a child expecting to be learn the final truth about Santa Claus, bracing for the disappointment to come.

“You are very kissable,” he assured her, and if, for a brief moment he wondered, again, what it might be like to kiss her, it was because he was human. And he really liked girls, and her mouth had gone soft and open and she had the saddest expression in her eyes – and a kiss from him, right now, was about the stupidest idea in the history of ever. Between her confusion and his life with Echo, him kissing her now would lead to nothing but epic disaster. “Really and truly kissable,” he said firmly.

She raised her chin, looking pleased, “Good.”

He settled back on the bench, reaching for his coffee, and said encouragingly, “So. You kissed her
“Just a little.” Clarke smiled softly, “It was a nice surprise, you know? But it was also weird, and unexpected and I wasn’t ready and I pulled back. So much was going on, you know? Finn was barely dead a week, and she didn’t warn anyone in TonDC about the missile and I agreed because she said it was the only way to save you and save the mission, keep you from being discovered, and she knew I valued you too much to lose you, and then she was going to have Octavia killed after she figured it out and then …”

“Wait.” Oddly fascinated by Clarke’s interest in Lexa, however doomed to disaster he knew it was because Lexa was … Lexa, Bellamy sort of missed the middle of what Clarke said, but he caught at the tail end of the flood of information. He’d already known about the missile thing, Raven and Octavia had both told him so that wasn’t news, but this, “Did you say – Lexa knew you valued me, but at the same time she was going to kill my sister?”

That certainly was an interesting choice on Lexa’s part. If Lincoln hadn’t killed her first, Bellamy would have done it for him. Or they both would have died trying and Clarke would have been left more isolated than before.

What a conniving, loathsome bitch.

“Yes. I stopped her.” Clarke glowered across the tent. “She didn’t trust Octavia’s word. Because she’s a big old lying liar herself. Her word doesn’t mean a damn thing, so why would anyone else’s mean anything either?”

He had been, at best, ambivalent about Lexa when the Arkers first started dealing with her. At his worst, with memories of standing in front of Roma’s corpse creeping up on him, or Raven’s screams in pain and panic, he would have found it quite satisfying to run a spear through Lexa himself. Then, after the mountain, he’d pretty much written Lexa off completely as a waste of human space. Albeit a politically important one he would have to deal with regularly for all of the foreseeable future. Now he knew exactly how Kane and Jaha had felt about Diana Sydney. While this news didn’t lower his opinion of Lexa any further, since that wasn’t really possible, it certainly fanned his distrust. “That’s a good question,” he said to Clarke.

“And then, can you believe, when we met a week ago, she actually said she still wanted to ….to…” Clarke trailed off, waving her hands, flailing helplessly for words.

Then she looked up at him, some kind of weird light in her eye. “I am a liar magnet, aren’t I? A fucking liar magnet. An electromagnet! My mom. Wells. Finn. Lexa. What the hell is wrong with me?” She banged her hands down on the table top, making dishes rattle, to emphasize her question.

Bellamy reached out and caught her hands, pressing them flat into the tabletop.

“Nothing, Clarke. Nothing at all,” He relaxed his hold on her hands enough to turn them into his grip and gently squeeze her fingers, trying to communicate as much by touch as his voice, into which he poured all the conviction he could muster. Clarke deserved so much better than all this. “You aren’t a liar magnet and the whole world turned upside down in the last few months. It will right itself and you will find people who don’t lie to you.” He let go and crossed his arms to lean on them. “Have the rest of your sandwich and finish your coffee. I’ll stay with you until I have to go on duty.”

“What! Why?”

“Clarke. You’re heading for drunken sobbing, or possibly a screaming confrontation with Lexa,
and you’re starting to talk too loud. Once you’ve eaten, let’s go find Raven and Octavia and skip all that, okay?”
Abby stood at the front of the Meeting Hall, giving directions to the group hanging the screen. It was just after 4:00 am, outside the moon was beginning to set. The reading would start in less than an hour and they were running a little behind on set up.

“Abby,” Kane said from behind her, “the screen is fine.”

Abby looked at him, glanced back at the screen, and nodded. She waved to the crew. “It’s fine. Good. Thanks.”

The mirrored ball was still turning, but the room lights had been brought up just enough for the volunteers to see what they were doing. Clearing away the music equipment, resetting the stage, setting out the projection equipment. The people who’d been blanketeting the floor, sitting in small groups and singing along with old rock power ballads and folk music classics were shuffling to their feet and filing out to bring in the benches.

“I know,” she said. "It’s just – this is our first Solstice on the ground. And it’s been a hell of a year.”

“Yes.”

“Do you think we’ve timed it right?”

“Sinclair has run the numbers for you about two dozen times. I think we’ve got it.”

“I know he has. But – there are so many more names this year.”

Kane just nodded.

“And the screen images won’t be too cheesy?”

“They’re incredibly cheesy, Abby. Nothing will ever replace seeing space from above the atmosphere. Somehow, down here, even though I know that those are real images of what I saw with my own eyes looking out the windows of the Ark, they do look fake and goofy. But they are as close as you and I and most of us here will ever come to touching the stars again.”

“I never thought about how much I could miss it.”

“We were born and raised up there. It was, however fragile, our home. It had it’s own terrible beauty.”

Abby thought again of the view of the earth from the Ark. The planet had floated below them, serene and untouchable, hiding all its ferocious, abundant, verdant life under its glorious colors. The rock to which they had all yearned to send a generation as yet unborn. A generation that might still yet never be born, if they bungled the next few years as badly as the one they had just barely survived.

“I sometimes miss weightlessness,” she said.

“Sometimes? I miss it every morning. Nothing like gravity 24/7 to remind me that my knees are old.”

Abby chuckled under her breath, then turned to answer a question about the podium.
At 4:30 am, and again at 4:45 am, they sounded the same chimes that they’d used on the Ark to call people to together. The loudspeakers hanging from the exterior corners of the Meeting Hall sent the message to everyone on the plateau – in the food tents grabbing coffee and a roll before the Reading, or, like their Trikru guests, resting in the converted Quonset hut dorms.

People began streaming in, seats in front reserved for those reading, and seats just behind saved for Lexa and her senior advisors.

Abby looked for Clarke, and was relieved to see her sitting toward the front half of the room with a large group of her friends.

Odd how everything worked out, she thought. Clarke had never had many friends her own age on the Ark. Between the burden of being her parents’ daughter, with the privileges and distances that created, and her close friendship with Wells Jaha, she’d only made glancing efforts at broadening her circle among the other kids her own age. She’d make a few friends each year in school, but they would fade away as the next year began, replaced with a new group, each little cohort fading in and out of her life as she grew up.

Now Clarke seemed surrounded, for as much of her free time as she would permit it, by the remaining members of the delinquents and their grateful families. It was hardly enough to qualify as a silver lining after this most horrific year, but it was a positive enough change to bolster Abby’s often-flagging faith in their future. Between the unknown ‘her’ who had perhaps been the proximate cause of Armageddon and might still be active, and the seething tensions between the clans over past and current injustices and disputes, she had to actively struggle against sinking into a black depression. She treasured any positive development against overwhelming – but maybe not quite inescapable – despair.

Clarke’s newfound friendships were one such talisman. Another was Echo and her baby. She and Bellamy caught Abby’s eye as they slipped in just before the projector started up, taking seats in the front because Bellamy was one of the readers. If this baby was born healthy and strong, he or she could be a sign and symbol that a future without war could be possible. If Arkers and Grounders could find their way forward together and not sink into a last gasp of frenzied bloodletting that would destroy them all.

It was a heavy burden to heap on one baby and two young people brought together by the potent alchemy of sex, death and survivor guilt rather than friendship, affection or love, she knew, but she could and did believe that they were strong enough to bear it. That other couples and other babies would follow in the next few years. Assuming they lived through them.

At 4:50 am, the lights dimmed and the projector came on.

At five o’clock, the chimes sounded again.

Abby stood and walked to the center of the small stage, now cleared of the sound deck and set with a single podium, lit by a small lamp shaded so as not to feature the speaker or detract from the images on the screen. Images of space, the blue globe of Earth floating beneath them, taken by the Ark’s many cameras on all the solstices before this one, the last 97 years wheeling majestically past on the screen.

In deference to their guests, and as a reminder to themselves, she began. “Once each year, we of the Ark take the time to remember. Our journey on board the twelve stations that combined to form our Ark has been long, and harrowing at times. The rules that we lived by have been as unyielding as the vacuum of space. Many have died that we live on. We owe them our thanks and gratitude.”
She paused, waiting for the shuffling to settle as the last of the latecomers slipped in to sit along the back wall.

“We honor them by remembering their names.”

She stepped aside as the oldest living survivor to reach the ground, Ellen Hanushka, took her place at the podium.


The images of the stars wheeled on behind the speakers, more than forty of them, as they rose one by one to read a hundred or so names, in the order of their passing.

The reading was twice as long as it had ever been. This last year had taken an enormous toll on the Ark and its people. Nearly four thousand of their number would be remembered tonight.

Their voices rose and fell, men and women, quavering and strong. The oldest readers read the oldest names, and as they worked their way toward the present she could feel the room bracing for the losses of the last year.

For the first time, like nearly everyone else who had survived earthfall, Abby would know and could recall most of the faces of the dead. Not as blurry images, barely remembered from childhood, but as adults. As children. As friends, and colleagues, acquaintances or patients, she had known them. Touched them. Been touched by them. She knew them. Knew their children. Knew their names.

Their names washed over her, weighing her down with their memories and their sacrifices.

“Adele Jaha.”

“Jack Murphy.”

“Carmen Reyes.”

“Olga Murphy.”

“Aurora Blake.”

She waited, dreading the inevitable moment as it grew closer. For her, this last, most bloody year would begin with one name. It arrived just less than half way through the list of the dead.

“Jake Griffin.”

She did not want to look to Clarke. She could not bear it. Whatever Clarke did – look away, glare, cry – it would be too much. She looked anyway. Clarke’s head was bowed and Abby could not see her face.

When her turn came again, Abby resumed her place at the podium, beginning her reading of the first of the three hundred and twenty deaths of the culling, her penance and her right. “Tor Lemkin. Sarah Ridley…”
Sinclair took the middle third, Marcus Kane the last.

The list rolled on.


David Miller read the names of those lost to Diana Syndey’s treason on her stolen drop ship.

Then came the horrible stretch when the names of the fifteen hundred more who died as a result of the damage to the Ark were read. Fifteen readers, one by one took their turn. Another six readers then stood for those who had taken the last great leap towards the Earth but had died along the way.

It took nearly two hours to read the full listing of the dead.

Those who survived to sit in the new Meeting Hall on the top of Mt. Weather as the Solstice night wore on had cried, and grown still and wept again. Memory and time had filled the quiet noises of gentle tears as the Reading began. As it ground its inexorable way forward, reaching into the present, to the mothers and fathers and sons and daughters who had survived, the weeping grew deeper, a hoarse, growling current of pain yet uncapped. Flowing out like a black river into the deepest part of the dark, just before the dawn.

Bellamy Blake was the last to read. Speaking for the children he had done his best to lead, and shelter and save, and lost, he read the names of those who had died on the ground. “Glenn Dickson. Trina Woodley. Atom Luckacevic. Pascal Girad. Tomas Witherspoon. Wells Jaha. Charlotte Fry. John Mbege. Roma Cordero…”

Once Bellamy finished, a long period of silence fell, broken only by the wrenching sounds of heartache. At last, Marcus took the podium again. He concluded the Reading with the benediction of the Ark, the only one they had ever had. “We re-commit these souls to the deep, who at their last gave all in the hopes of a new world for the living. May they be remembered forever, until there is no more pain, no more suffering, and the abyss itself shall give up her dead and return them to us.”

As he finished, he switched off the light at the podium and on this cue, the projector dimmed, and those waiting at the entrance opened the double doors together, creating a gap of slightly more than a span of two hands. The cold air flowing in was sharp and cold, breaking the atmosphere thick with sorrow with the scent of fresh snow. The strip of sky between the doors was a glowing column, pale rose gold at the base and rising to a deepening blue at the top, blindingly bright against the blackness of the interior of the Hall.

Slowly at first, but more quickly with each passing minute, the burning red gold light of the sun reached over the horizon and filled the lower half of the opening, casting a radiant yellow line down the center of the hall until it reached the podium itself, where, during the darkness, Kane had placed the Book of Names, saved from the Ark after it fell.

Like the great standing stones of millennia past, the building itself had been sited for just this event, the doors working to frame the moment when the sun would break over the eastern horizon at the turning of the year, creep across the lowlands and up the foothills until it, at last, reached this place.

As the sun broke completely free from the edge of the earth, the doors were opened wide, and Kane called, “It is a new dawn. We are on the Earth, and we have at last rejoined our long
sundered human kin. The tree is strong, and we are alive. May we, all of us, prosper in the year to come."
“You gotta tell him to stop. Tell them to stop,” Monty wailed in an undertone as Clarke re-joined him at their table in the mess hall, coffee refills in hand.

“Stop what? Who?” she asked.

“Them! Tell them to stop being so….” Monty flapped his hand at a table across the room, “… so them.”

Clarke looked at the far table in the mess hall. Lincoln and Octavia had swept in awhile ago, escorting a batch of Lincoln’s former patients. Posse. Men. It really wasn’t clear what role officially marked them. They were the riders who’d accompanied them on their trip north and rode out now with Bellamy and Lincoln, especially when they went hunting or scouting. Soon Midori Zimmerman and Kevin Hu arrived and sat down to eat with them as well. Then Bellamy and Echo showed up, bringing with them a handful of the younger guards, some of them former delinquents, others upstanding young Arkers. They were all members of the new Ranger unit, created by Kane and placed under Bellamy’s command, complete with special caps. All of them looking lean and dangerous as they sat together and laughed and talked while they ate.

Clarke looked back at Monty. “You want me to tell the cool kids in the lunch room to cut it out? Really?”

“Yeah!”

“You’re ridiculous, you know that?”

Monty made a face. Then he leaned closer and asked, “Is it true?”

“Is what true?” Clarke asked with a sinking feeling.

“That Echo’s got a bun in the oven.”

“Bun in the oven? How old are you? 12?”

“Yeah!” Monty gestured impatiently with the spoon he’d been using to dump mounds of sweetener into his coffee. “So?”

“Yes.” Clarke nodded firmly. Bellamy had been quite clear. If the word got out, and he suspected that some of the more eagle-eyed older women were on to them and the rumors were going to flow soon, confirm. “It’s true. Echo is pregnant.” Then she said, hoping to forestall any more gossip about Echo, “You could join them, you know. Miller’s over there. So’s Monroe. And you know them all better than I do – you took a road trip with them! In fact, if you weren’t so desperately needed where you are in agronomics, I’m sure Kane would have put you in the Rangers. Would still, if you’d ask.”

“Yeah. No. Geeks over here,” he gestured at the papers and plant studies between them, “cool kids who actually like guns over there.” He waved his hands, scooting imaginary gun germs back across the room.

“They all think you’re cool.”

Monty flushed.
“Monty’s got a point, though, about telling them to throttle back a bit,” Wick said, speaking up for the first time. He’d been sitting with them, but had stayed pretty focused on his lunch and something he was frowning at on his data pad. Raven hadn’t come. She was having a bad day with her leg, and Wick was taking food to her. He went on, “There are definitely people who are a little freaked out to see how tight the Blakes are with Grounders. That Kane is talking about letting Grounders join the Rangers.”

“He’s talking about inviting Lincoln to join. That’s not really the same.”

“Camel’s nose, tent, you know the rest,” Wick said. “That’s what they’re saying. That Lincoln’s whole little posse will be next. The Echo plus baby situation will just encourage those concerns, when the news really starts to spread. Make people wonder where Bellamy’s and Octavia’s loyalties really lie.”

“You already knew?” Monty glared at Wick. “And you didn’t tell me?”

Clarke talked over him, focusing on the bigger issue. “Why do some people always want to question Bellamy’s loyalty?”

“He has a sister he helped hide for sixteen years,” Wick said. “He shot Jaha so he could drop to Earth with her. He saved the only survivor from factory station. He was the indispensable inside man when we took the mountain. He’s scary and hot all at once. He’s creepy good at getting people on his side, even when no one is sure what side that is. He’s Kane’s golden boy. And everyone, absolutely everyone, believes that if he’s not leading our troops on the ground when war comes, we will lose.”

“So what is it, exactly, I’m supposed to tell him, tell them, to stop doing? And why should they listen?” Clarke demanded.

Wick laughed. “I have no idea. They’re not really doing anything but being themselves, but they can’t let themselves get isolated. And they all listen to you. Bellamy listens to you. He trusts you. And he’s not entirely stupid.”

“Not very stupid at all, you mean,” Clark smirked and gestured with her chin, back toward the loud, busy table full of all the cool kids.

The mess hall was getting crowded enough that there were no more unoccupied tables. Bellamy must have already realized it, because he was on his feet, offering his chair and the one next to it to Mrs. Adelman and her grandson Willie. Then he dragged over another chair from a different table and sat down beside them, introducing them around to the cool kids. Even from across the room it was clear that seven-year-old Willie’s eyes were going to fall out of his head in about two more seconds, they were so wide with thrilled awe.

After watching for a while in contemplative silence, Wick turned back to Clarke and Monty. “Does he think it through? Is it a Machiavellian plan? Or improv all the way?”

Clarke shook her head, as bemused as Wick was by the mystery. “I have never been able to figure out where the line falls between the two.”
“What’s this?” Bellamy asked, raising a canteen to his lips and jerking his chin and his elbow at a Trikru tent set up just outside the fence at the Drop Ship.

“They showed up two days ago, sir.”

Bellamy bit back his instinct to say, ‘stop calling me sir, kid,’ because that was just as inane as him being a ‘sir’ in the first place.

He and Lincoln and their patrol were heading back to the mountain after a nearly three-week trip surveying the perimeter of Mt. Weather’s territory. While the whole footprint of ‘their’ territory was impossibly tiny for someone used to thinking of Earth as an entire planet, it was still just under 350 kilometers on foot to walk the circumference. Some of that aligned with old roads, some of it was onto the rolling piedmont to the east but some of it was not. Some of it involved crossing back and forth over the Shenandoah River and climbing into the lower slopes of the Eastern Blue Ridge Mountains. All of it in crusty, ankle-deep snow.

“What do they want?” Bellamy asked.

“They wouldn’t say. They want to talk with you or Clarke, so when I told them you were due here soon they said they’d wait.”

“How many of them are there?”

“Six.”

“Okay. Let me put my pack down and get settled and we’ll deal with them.”

While they were talking, three Trikru emerged from their large campaign tent, two men and a woman. Bellamy had yet to fully parse Trikru gender roles, but he was pretty sure that this woman was a fighter, a guard or something like, and not a companion or a servant.

“Or,” he said, watching them watch him, “No time like the present.”

He caught Lincoln’s eye and nodded to the newcomers. “Know any of them?”

“No,” Lincoln in turn looked at Wes, Beale and Macton, the former reapers who had become part of Lincoln’s, and thus Bellamy’s, regular team. They were mostly silent men, all in their late twenties, haunted by their months as reapers, who had found it easier to change their lives rather than attempt to return to whoever they had been before. Bellamy knew that Beale at least had an older sister who had tried to get him to come home, but he’d refused her. Wes and Macton had no family that had sought them out.

The other men shook their heads, they didn’t recognize the new Trikru either. So, not from TonDC or the other western and northern Woods Clan villages then, Bellamy concluded. The strangers’ gear looked pretty good, well made and no weird dangly bits of claw or tooth. They also had on decent boots. He began to suspect they had come from Polis itself.

He offloaded his pack, rolling his shoulders and stretching a bit in relief, then, as soon as the others had done the same, they headed for the tent.

“I hear you’re looking for me?” he said, in English. His Trigedasleng was pretty good these days,
but playing stupid was a game that served many ends.

“Boss is,” said the woman, stepping back and holding open the tent flap.

Bellamy exchanged a quick eye roll with Lincoln, then ducked his head to step inside.

Having seen the interior of Lexa’s command tent, he wasn’t shocked by the size, but this one was pretty sparsely furnished. Nothing that couldn’t have been carried between the men and the two packhorses hobbled behind it.

Three men were inside, two sitting on the ground cloths near neatly rolled bedding and mending leather goods, and one man sitting in a folding chair next to a small folding table. There was an empty chair, which the man invited Bellamy to take.

Bellamy took the chair, sitting a bit sideways to accommodate slinging his rifle around to rest in his lap. Lincoln and Wes had followed him in and stood near the entrance. Macton and Beale and the other three Ark-born members of their eight-man squad, he knew, would have taken up positions outside, keeping an eye on the rest of the strangers. He waited to let the man begin.

The man, slim, older, mid-forties maybe, was the first grounder man he’d ever met besides Lincoln who was wearing his hair short. It was a fine brown, going grey at the temples and beginning to thin across the top. His eyes were also light brown and his skin the indeterminate tan of most grounders they’d come across so far. His face was clean of any paint, and his dark brown clothing utterly free of most of the decorative trimmings of bits of trash and bone or extraneous buckles and clasps Bellamy had come to associate with grounders in general.

He seemed to be looking Bellamy over just as closely as Bellamy was examining him. Finally he smiled. “I’ve heard about you, Bellamy Blake of the Skaikru. You don’t disappoint.”

Bellamy was tired, hungry, and really ready to take off his boots for a while. “That’s nice,” he said.

“You can call me Oskair.”

“Okay, Oskair.”

“I am from Polis.”

“I guessed as much.”

“I am a merchant.”

Bellamy narrowed his eyes, suddenly feeling a great deal more alert. “What’s your business here, merchant?”

“I sell Kaf.”

There had been a few Trikru at the Exchange already, looking to trade for small quantities of the stuff. Kane had willingly sold it to them, but the amounts were too small to account for the kind of deals Dante Wallace had been making, based on the quantities produced on the grow floors. Which meant that there had to be a shortage, somewhere, in the Kaf supply chain. They seemed to have finally found it. Or rather, he had found them. Bellamy said, “Which means, you need to buy Kaf.”

“You understand me.”

“Price of Kaf must be high right now.”
“It is.” Oskair agreed.

“Many suppliers of Kaf?” Bellamy asked.

“A few. But some suppliers are better and more consistent than others.”

“Dante Wallace was a good supplier?”

“Yes. He was.”

“I see.”

“I hoped you would.”

“This is not a problem for my people, so why this approach? Why not travel direct to the Exchange at the mountain? Is Kaf not a customary market good in Polis?”

This was something Kane and his team had been trying to figure out for a while now, without actually coming right out and asking, not wanting to reveal why they wanted to know. The answers they kept getting were ambiguous. In part because the Clans didn’t seem to have ‘laws’ in a conventional, codified sense, more a series of promulgations by their current commander built on a jerry-rigged edifice of cultural practices and ancient, half remembered legal mores.

Mores that didn’t, much to Bellamy’s disgust, recall anything about an actual investigation of a crime or the rights of the accused or some sort of a trial. The Ark’s justice had been swift and final once a verdict was issued, but they didn’t take it lightly or skimp on investigation or float people unless they were certain they had the right one. Floating would have sparked even more resistance than it already had unless everyone agreed and believed that only the guilty were floated.

For the Trikru, if a commander wanted something to be verboten, it was. If the next commander didn’t care, it was ignored. If a commander wanted to override the previous commander, he or she could. Several commanders back, there were a series of promulgations condemning drinking, drugs and promiscuous sex. These were – as far as Kane and his researchers could determine – about as effective as such promulgations usually were, which is to say, not very. Since then the subjects appeared to have been largely ignored.

“It is a…” Oskair paused delicately, and then finally concluded, “a good that requires a certain amount of discretion in handling and delivery.”

“And you can provide that discretion?”

“Yes. I can.”

“And what do you offer in exchange?”

“Information.”

“Hmm.” Bellamy cocked his head. “That’s a difficult good to value.”

“A taste, then?”

“Sure.”

“There is a faction, in the leadership, that feels that the current commander is moving too quickly to abandon the old ways.”
“This an utterly predictable development, Oskair.”

Oskair laughed. “It must be, to those who value history the way you Skaikru do. But I can provide a complete dossier on each and every member of the prominent members of the Trikru, their alliances, ties, and resources.”

Bellamy chuckled without any humor. “Selling me what you already sold Wallace?”

“That doesn’t make it less useful.”

Bellamy nodded, then he said, “And what other items do you have for trade?”

“Are you looking for anything in particular?”

“Coke.”

Oskair shook his head, his expression blank.

Bellamy tried again, “Coal.”

“Ah,” Oskair frowned. “That’s an awkward good for transport.”

So, either Oskair knew that coke was an ingredient in making propellants for firearms and didn’t want to give it up, or he genuinely didn’t know what it was. Since he seemed prepared but unenthusiastic about dealing in coal itself, Bellamy kind of suspected the latter, but that could be determined later. Next he tried. “Tanned deer or cow hides.”

“That, I can do.”

Bellamy didn’t enjoy haggling. The art of the market deal was not his great strength, and he especially didn’t enjoy haggling when getting up and walking away wasn’t really an option. Fortunately Sarah Monroe loved haggling almost as much as she loved hunting. He called her in, then left her to it while he went to the Drop Ship’s communication center to report on this latest development to Kane.
Octavia frowned at her tablet. She was working with Alice Hong to create a grammar for Trigedasleng. From that they were trying to derive rules so they could build a translation program. But something wasn’t working right with the rule they’d posited for subordinate clauses using *bilaik* and it was about to drive her bug nuts insane.

“Hey,” Clarke’s voice roused her. “It’s almost miller time.”

“What is ‘miller time’ anyway?” Octavia asked, looking up at last from her work. The evenings were lighter than they had been the month before, but it was still late twilight outside the clinic’s windows. She preferred to work here, where they daylight came, than in the schoolrooms or offices inside the mountain. Especially since Bellamy and Lincoln had left, travelling with their squad on a weeks-long trip around the perimeter of Ark territory.

Clarke didn’t mind that she spent her days here. Said it was nice to have company when things were slow, or help when things were busy.

They both kept saying they were going to move back to Camp Jaha, but they had never quite got around to it.

Kane and Chancellor Griffin wanted Clarke to stay where she was and kept finding new projects that required her special expertise close to hand. Lincoln was riding with Bellamy most of the time now, and between Kane and Echo, Bellamy was rooted to the mountain. So here she and Clarke were, sitting quietly at the desks in the plateau clinic and working in companionable silence.

“I actually looked that up the other day. It’s from an old beer commercial,” Clarke replied.

“Ugh, really?” Octavia made a face. “That ‘beer’ someone picked up at the exchange was nasty.”

“I know!” Clarke laughed. “So weird.”

Before Octavia could respond, the radio squelched. “Mountain Clinic! Hailing Mountain Clinic! Do you read?”

Octavia felt her heartbeat speed up.

Clarke picked up the handset. “Yes. I’m here. Over.”

“Clarke? It’s Nathan. I’m on post duty at the lower road. A Trikru just showed up. He’s got a really pregnant lady on a horse and she’s in a bad way. He’s asking for help. Over.”

“Well, send them up!” Clarke exclaimed.

“She looks really bad. Really, really bad, Clarke. It’s a long walk up the hill, it’s getting dark and it’s wet cold tonight.”

“Like – going into labor bad?”

“How the hell would I know?!” Nathan not-quite-squeaked. “But she’s short of breath and her pulse is really fast, I think. She’s also super pale and having trouble staying conscious.”

Clarke frowned.
“Did I mention the baby they already have with them?” Nathan was sounding increasingly
desperate.

“You’re right. Not good. I’ll call my mom and get back to you. Over.” She dropped the handset
back on its hook, then looked at Octavia. “Get the med kit ready. I’m going to send you down in a
car to pick them up and bring them here.”

“Me!”

“You speak Trigedasleng and are almost done with your field medic tests. Yes. You.”

So fifteen minutes later Octavia was hustling through the parking garage to a waiting SUV, driver
at the ready and the emergency med kit heavy on her back. The trip by vehicle to the lower guard
post was barely seven or eight minutes long. This was not nearly enough time for Octavia to
compose herself, but quite enough time for full dark to fall.

When she hopped out at the guard post, she was comforted at first because whatever else was
going on, there was clearly no sudden childbirth taking place. A short woman was sitting on a
bench, a toddler in her arms, her belly hidden in the massive pile of blankets she’d been wrapped
in. Her man was sitting next to her, talking in a low voice, encouraging her by his tone. Then
Octavia got a good look at her face in the harsh light over the guard post door. She looked terrible.
Pale and sweating despite the cold, bright fever flush on her cheeks, her breathing short and her
eyes unfocused.

Octavia introduced herself, and learned that their names were Kavan and Mari. The baby was
named Danyul. Then she explained that she’d like to take Mari’s vital signs. As soon as she saw
the blood pressure reading, 170/100, she smiled as reassuringly as she could, walked into the guard
post and called Clarke.

“That’s not good, is it?” Octavia asked, hoping her voice wasn’t actually quavering.

“No. Not good at all,” said Dr. Griffin, who had answered. “Get her up here as quickly and calmly
as you can.”

The ride up the hill was short, but horrible. Mari had jarred something in her belly as they lifted her
to her feet – an action which revealed she was hugely pregnant, like an exercise ball on legs – and
she clutched her side the whole way, tears rolling down her cheeks from under her closed eyelids.
She didn’t make a sound, though.

Kavan kept assuring Octavia that Mari was nowhere near her time, it was just that something
wasn’t going quite right. His brother’s wife had come for genetic counseling in the fall and had
praised Dr. Griffin so highly, Kavan hoped that maybe she could help Mari too. Give her
something that could get her through to deliver a healthy baby by the time of the spring thaw.

Dr. Griffin took one look at the patient as they staggered into the clinic, then ordered, “Clarke,
prep for surgery.”

“Surgery!” Clarke gasped.

“She has eclampsia. The only cure is to not be pregnant. We have to get that baby out. Now.” Dr.
Griffin turned to Octavia. “This is going to stretch that dictionary of yours to the limit, I know. But
you have a gift for working with people who are panicked. Rely on it.”

Kavan did indeed panic. He actually tried to get up and herd his family out, until Dr. Griffin made
it clear that Mari would die. And so, as they discovered, would the babies. Dr. Griffin had brought
up the portable ultrasound while Octavia was escorting Mari up to the plateau, and now they could all see that part of the reason Mari was so huge was that she was carrying twins. “Big boys,” Dr. Griffin cooed to Kavan, a huge smile on her face, rapidly measuring each image. “Almost two kilos each.”

When she heard that she had twins, and that they could be saved and so could she, Mari clutched at Kavan’s sleeve and whispered breathily to him, too fast and low and slurred for Octavia to know what she said. But, nearly as white-faced as Mari now, Kavan stepped back and nodded for them to go ahead.

The twins were not big. Not by any stretch of the imagination, as far as Octavia was concerned. They each could fit neatly into Kavan’s large, oddly stained palm, crying with thin, reedy little gasps. Kavan’s face had turned nearly grey by this point, but Dr. Griffin insisted that for preemies the babies were in excellent condition and were very healthy and strong and breathing easily on their own. Mari must have been further along than they realized, she said. Then she slipped the babies into a special warming incubator that had been carried out while she and Clarke were performing the surgery.

Mari, once she turned her head and saw her new sons feebly kicking their wee little legs, smiled so beatifically at Kavan that he actually managed to smile back.

Much later that night, after an exhausted, post-surgery Mari had fallen asleep, and already her skin looked better, Octavia noted, she had a chance to really talk with Kavan. In the meantime she’d also rousted out a man named Osten, another former Ice Nation reaper who’d been taken on at the stable, to help her with translating. Kavan had also recovered enough, a meal and a shower and clean clothes helped everyone feel better, to be able to recall at last some of his English.

He had once been a warrior, he told them, but had retired to his village when his wife was pregnant. There he had taken up tanning hides. But now, he explained, despair on his face, they could not go back.

“What on earth not?” Octavia asked.

“Because Mari failed the test,” he said simply. “And the babies are too small to live.”

“What test?”

“Women must deliver alone. Only the strong survive. The weak burden the clan.”

“But that’s crazy!” Octavia exclaimed. “Mari will fully recover. She will be strong again for you, for Danyul, for the new ones. She just needed help this one time! And your babies should be just fine!”

“It is our way,” he said.

“Your way allows you to help warriors after battle,” Octavia snapped. “Why not women during labor? Or newborns who need a little extra care?”

Kavan looked at Osten. They both looked at her and shrugged. “Only the strong survive their beginnings. It is what makes us strong,” Osten said.

“So what do you propose to do now?” Octavia asked Kavan.

Kavan sighed, and his face seemed to age as she watched. “We will go into the Wastes once Mari can walk again, after the babies die. Hope to join the nomads.”
“First, your babies are not going to die. Second, you are not going to raise your family in the Wastes. That is not going to happen, Kavan. I will find you another way. I swear it.”
Clarke leaned over and checked the time again on Wick’s watch.

“Two more minutes since the last time you looked,” he said.

So. Twenty minutes.

The furious voices behind the closed door rose and fell, back and forth, but the soundproofing was too good for them to make out many actual words.

They’d been sitting on the floor outside Echo’s quarters for twenty minutes. Waiting for the fight to subside. Waiting for the door to open.

Echo pushed herself to her feet, brushed off the seat of her trousers, smoothed her tunic over the now fully apparent swell of her growing belly, and flipped her hair over her shoulders. “I am the pregnant person,” she announced. “They should not be arguing about me outside of my presence.”

Right on cue came the sound of something heavy and ceramic shattering behind the door.

Echo froze, then looked around at the rest of them, Raven, Wick, Lincoln, and Clarke. “I think,” she said, “I will wait a little longer.” She sat back down.

Their impromptu welcome home party for Lincoln and Bellamy and the rest of their squad had started out well enough, Clarke thought. Octavia had been a little late, but no one thought much of it. Until she burst through the door, her finger already waving in her brother’s face, demanding an explanation for how and why he thought it was a good idea to hide things from her. “How could you know, Bell, that Echo and your baby could be in danger and not tell me?” she’d cried.

“No one is in any danger,” he’d said, looking and sounding completely annoyed that she was involving herself now. “And it wasn’t any of your business anyway.”

That had rocked her back on her feet, but, being Octavia, she’d come out swinging about the fine distinctions he drew between his business and her business. It got old and bitter really fast – flying past John Murphy and Atom Luckacevic and the Skybox and then on to Aurora Blake – and the guests found themselves slowly backing away, by ones and twos slinking out the door and fleeing down the corridor. Echo was the last to leave.

The rest of their friends had (sensibly) vanished, leaving only the five of them here, siting vigil.

“Fighting with Octavia always this bad?” Wick asked.

“I don’t know,” Lincoln said. “We don’t fight. Or, not like this,” he gestured to the room behind them.

Another loud crash made them all twitch and wince.

“I wouldn’t assume that was Octavia that smashed whatever just got smashed,” Clarke said, responding to some obscure impulse to defend Octavia’s honor. Sure, she could be volatile and unpredictable and was more than capable of smashing things in a fit of rage, but Clarke could remember what Bellamy looked like when he was furious. Smashing something did not seem to her to be at all beyond him when he was in that state.
Everyone paused to take that in, and then there was a general bobbing of heads in agreement.

“Echo, what exactly are the consequences for you and your baby, if you give birth here?” Raven asked after another minute or so of low rumbling behind the door.

“Pregnant women give birth far from home on occasion. It’s not unheard of,” Echo said.

“And?” Wick prompted. “We all know Kavan’s and Mari’s story. About how Mari’s and the twins’ lives are forfeit for not abiding by the rule to give birth alone, or they all have to go into exile together. And how, under some interpretations of old rules, Kavan, Dr. Griffin and Clarke, even Octavia and Danyul could also face some sort of sanction for helping her.”

“The Azgeda are not the same as the Trikru.”

“How not the same, exactly?” Raven said.

“They would accept my word, if I told them I passed the test.”

“If they don’t?” Wick pressed.

Echo frowned, then snapped irritably, “If they don’t, then, like Mari and her infants, we could face exile or death. But that will not happen.”

“Why not?” prompted Raven.

“These things have not happened, not since my aunt became queen ten years ago,” Echo said. “She is not one of the traditionalists. And it would not matter if I go home for the birth.”

“Which means Bellamy loses all claims to his child, right?” Clarke asked, trying not to sound as completely disapproving as she felt about this plan and, judging by Echo’s offended expression, failing.

Echo thrust out her chin. “Only if that is what I chose to do.”

“If?” Clarke knew she sounded angry and challenging. That’s how she felt.

Echo glared at her. “I have not decided what will be best.”

“Good God. No wonder Bellamy’s smashing things,” Raven said.
Business before the Council

Abby kept her face smooth and interested and patient. Or tried to, anyway. This was the third petition this week to create more rules to govern visits by members of the clans.

The petitions were a mess of unenforceable dicta, each one easily dismissed on the merits alone. But the underlying emotions – distaste and fear and disgust all wrapped up into barely controlled panic – were not easily dismissed at all.

The spring thaw was still nearly two months away. But Arkers were worried about what the summer would bring. They had no information and even less control over what was happening in Polis, or any of the other capital cities of the twelve clans of Lexa’s alliance-in-name-only.

So instead they sought to control access to their own lives, here in this tiny little bubble of Mt. Weather.

Events, however, were all pulling them in other directions. Kavan and Mari and their little family, formerly of the Trikru, for example. As soon as their situation had become public knowledge (thanks largely to the indefatigable efforts of Octavia Blake), the Arkers, with a few notable exceptions, had risen to the occasion. They had insisted, via a formal petition to the Council, that Kavan and Mari and their children find formal sanctuary here, along with the dozen or so former reapers who had never really left (Kavan and Mari had both cried when they heard the news).

It was the notable exceptions who were bothering Abby today. They had decided to see Kavan and Mari as the first signs of a coming invasion. That the clans would send their weak and their troubled and their needy to appeal to the charity of the Ark. That this drain on Ark resources would leave them helpless before the final assault, while they were further weakened from within by a fifth column of treacherous asylum seekers.

Confirmation gleaned from Bellamy’s new contact Oskair, that Lexa and other clan leaders were dealing with similar issues born of distrust for strangers among their own frightened and recalcitrant minorities, was really not very reassuring at all.

Pike finished his presentation and Abby forced a smile. “Thank you. The council will take your recommendations under advisement.”

“You mean you’ll file them in the closest paper shredder,” Pike said, a (falsely) genial smile on his own face.

“No. But, as we’ve stated on the three previous occasions when you made similar suggestions, our stance towards our neighbors is a welcoming one. To close ourselves off and treat all strangers as threats is to become what we fear.”

“And when we are wiped out by those we welcome?”

“Then…” Abby felt Marcus’s boot crushing her toe under the table. “Then we will be dead, but only after having walked on the ground, breathed the free air and watched the solstice sun rise over a vibrant earth. We could have suffered far worse fates than this.”

Pike, who knew an untoppable line when he heard one, bowed his head and departed, his dignity intact.

Marcus sighed and scrubbed his face. “So. Are we ready to announce our decision to offer to
induct Lincoln along with Wes, Beale, Macton and now Kavan into the Rangers?"

“There is no time like the present for touchy news,” Sinclair shrugged. “Might as well get it out there, deal with the fallout while Kavan and Mari and their plight still generate plenty of sympathy.”

“Which brings us to the Azgeda Ambassador and her delicate situation,” said Emily Hanushka. “Has anyone gotten a straight answer out of that girl about what the full range of consequences might be?”

“Bad, badder and baddest, as far as I can tell,” Abby said tiredly. “Basically, her plan is to brazen it all through, somehow.”

“She is good at brazen,” said Alex Kwok, with a faintly admiring smile.

“Could she marry Bellamy, resign her role with the Azgeda and join ‘the Skaikru’?” asked Emily.

“No,” Kane replied. “It seems that as a member of the current ruling family, the understanding is that she owes her children to her family specifically and to the Azgeda more generally. So a formal marriage – particularly an unsanctioned one – outside the clan is not an option for her, lest a different clan try to claim any healthy children and their inheritance rights. In fact, her clan would refuse to recognize the marriage as valid or binding.”

“So what is it that she is supposed to do if she turns up pregnant far away from home?” Emily said, throwing up her hands in frustration.

“Return. Give birth among her people,” said Kane.

“If she does that?” Alex Kwok asked.

“Then her clan claims the child. Bellamy would almost certainly never see the baby again.”

“Even if Bellamy goes with her?” said Emily.

“Then, they might try to claim him too. By right, I understand, of conquest.”

Alex Kwok snickered. Abby sympathized. She’d laughed in shock the first time Echo had explained that bit herself.

“Can she leave the baby here, with us?” asked Sinclair.

“That might be a crime. It would be up to her queen to decide.”

Alex looked at Abby and asked with some exasperation, “Why did she come back?!?”

“She was afraid of dying for a mutant child,” Abby said. “She wanted access to a safe abortion if the child she was carrying wasn’t viable.”

Everyone fell silent for a moment, frowning down at the tabletop.

Sinclair finally broke the silence, saying, “So, am I hearing correctly? That Echo will have to return to her people and that Bellamy will give up all contact with his child, or we risk some kind of a diplomatic crisis with the Azgeda?”

“Or he joins her there and we cut all ties with him, too,” Abby said.
“Hmmph,” Emily Hanushka finally snorted, then looked at Kane and raised her brow. “This fine mess have anything to do with Blake deciding the middle of winter was an excellent time to spend three weeks walking the perimeter?”

“It needed to be done before spring planting.” Then Kane’s lips twitched into a tiny, amused smile and he shrugged, “But it is possible the decision to go in mid-February was personally motivated.”

“Then when he got back, Octavia lit right into him,” Emily added. “I understand it was quite the epic blowout.”

Abby marveled again at the speed and thoroughness of the informational network of the Ark.

“Thus the six-day training maneuvers the Rangers left on yesterday?” Alex Kwok laughed.

Kane shook his head. “No. Those were already scheduled, but Bellamy certainly didn’t appear to have any desire to linger in his sister’s vicinity.”
The Chancellor banged her gavel several times, and the angry mutterers finally quieted and the fist-shaking standers resumed their seats.

“Jasper, please go on,” she said. “I’m sure that everyone will wait quietly in their seats until you’ve finished speaking.”

Bellamy thought that was an optimistic bet on her part.

Jasper nodded, then picked up from where he’d been interrupted. “I have thought about it. A lot. If I hadn’t been downstairs with Maya, if I’d been in the control room with Clarke and Bellamy and Monty, seen what they were seeing. I don’t know. I think I might have done the same thing.”

“You accused them of murder, in the hearing of several members of the community,” Dr. Griffin reminded Jasper.

Which, thought Bellamy, was an exceptionally civil way of saying, ‘you screamed MURDERER at the top of your lungs while trying to claw Bellamy’s eyes out in front of about a hundred people.’

“I was very upset, at the time, because people I cared about had died. But Maya,” he swallowed visibly, “Maya Vie, was right. None of them were innocent. They had all chosen to live at the expense of the people they captured and bled to death. People brought to them by others they drugged and enslaved and dehumanized. They would have shown no mercy to us, or to the clans, once they could walk free outside the mountain.”

“To be clear, Jasper, you said you would be arguing against the potential charge of genocide. Not explaining that you now sympathize with the choices made.”

“Right. Okay. The people who lived here,” Jasper gestured wide, taking in the whole of the room and the fortress around them, “They were NOT different from us. On the Ark, we made terrible choices about who could survive and who would die. They made terrible choices about who would live and who would die. Our only defense is that we killed ourselves, not outsiders. Wallace and his people refused to pay that price. They forced others to die so they could live. Like us, they justified their choices based on their circumstances. But to do that, they insisted that they were separate, special, different. More worthy of survival than the people of the clans. Or of the Ark. But they weren’t a separate people. They only wanted to think they were. Elevating their deaths to genocide gives them far more justification than they deserve for their utterly depraved actions.”

There was a stunned silence, and then the hall erupted into cheers and whistles and foot stomping applause.

Bellamy and Clarke didn’t stand up or cheer. He was too shaken by the wave of relief to trust his legs. When he looked at Clarke, who was sitting two spots over on the bench, past Octavia and Raven, he realized she was fighting tears. Not the good kind of relieved tears either, but the overwhelmed by regret way she had looked when she turned at the gate of Jaha and fled into the wilderness for three months. If he could have reached her to take her hand, he would have. He could reach Raven though, and he tugged at her shirt and nodded at Clarke.

Raven promptly dropped back to her seat and put her arm around Clarke’s shoulders and bent her head close to whisper to her.

Bellamy continued looking around the big room. He realized that he and Clarke weren’t the only
ones who weren’t applauding. There were a few, scattered others, people he recognized as friends of Pike, little islands of stillness in the animated crowd.

A few spots further on and a few rows up, Monty was on his feet, but he wasn’t cheering or clapping either and his shoulders were still rigid with tension. He and Jasper had barely spoken in months, as far as Bellamy knew. But Jasper had come from Jaha to speak today and Monty had come with him. Bellamy hoped that they had talked, hoped that they could mend their friendship.

Pike, the sanctimonious pedant, tried to redirect by proposing a simple war crimes charge. But without the Hitler comparisons giving him special moral authority, he’d clearly lost the sympathy of the crowd. The town hall meeting adjourned soon afterwards.

“To Jasper!” cried Nathan Miller.

“To Jasper!” cried their crowd of raucous supporters, mostly from the remnants of the delinquents or from the Rangers as they tossed back their shots and slammed their glasses on the tables. They were down in the bar after the meeting. Except Jasper. He’d gone back to the guest dorms on the plateau and Harper reported that he would be leaving for Jaha again first thing in the morning.

The outdoor cantina had relocated for the winter. It was now in, of all places, the intake chambers of the Cerberus program. It made sense from a space allocation perspective. No one else had wanted to use the rooms. They already had power, water, and access to the mountain’s sewage system. And the owners of the concession, two enterprising guys from agro station who called themselves Bill and Ted, had decided to run with it.

They named it ‘Mos Eisley’ and fixed it up to look like the iconic bar in Star Wars. Complete with a stage along one wall, white glowing tables, raised round booths, and a circular bar in the middle of the main room. Their only addition was the twenty or so flat screens they’d hung up everywhere, on which they were still broadcasting the entire Star Wars saga in a loop. They claimed they would eventually vary the playlist. When they got tired of Star Wars.

The council hadn’t been at all sure that this was a good idea, but they had actually held both an anonymous poll and specifically invited everyone who had come through those rooms and was still inside Ark territory to share what they thought.

Bellamy had been pretty taken aback the first time he heard the proposal. After thinking about it for a while, though, he decided there was a defiance in making the space all their own. A strong majority felt the same way. Bellamy’d made it a point to be there opening night, and he didn’t get shit-faced drunk. Not that night, at least.

It had taken Lincoln two weeks to venture down, but by then it was already a hit and full of people. Lincoln did get shit-faced drunk. Helping Octavia and Echo half drag, half carry his surprisingly heavy ass all the way up to their quarters on the top floor of the residence zones (Octavia preferred as little mountain between her and the exit as possible) had been quite the adventure, especially because none of them had been exactly sober.

Octavia reported that he spent the rest of what was left of the night puking, and swearing the ritual swear of never ever doing that again. The drinking, not visiting the Cantina. He was in love with the movies. Told Octavia that if they ever had a son, they had to name him Kenobi.

“So,” Bellamy looked around as Miller poured out another round, “who’s out there gossiping about how Clarke and Monty and I are genocidal fuckstains? Besides Pike and his little crew of sycophants.”
“I’m pretty sure no one said fuckstains,” Harper said.

Bellamy regarded her with a disbelieving stare.

“Okay. I’m pretty sure. It was more like, asshole Bellamy Blake thinks he’s so hot. Blah, blah, blah. Just another murderer, just like the grounders he and his precious sister like so much.”

Bellamy reached over and took Echo’s hand in his own, threading his fingers through her long, cold ones. Her fingers tightened around his. Able to see it more clearly now that his own potential court martial for war crimes had been averted, he said, “This is about grounders. About the clans. Not about genocide.”

“Yeah,” said Raven. “I really think it is. There’s still a lot of angst and fear about what the clans could do, if they decided to try and wipe us all out after all.”

“But genocide sounds more serious and less cowardly,” Clarke said, a scowl on her face. “More serious than all of their stupid little proposals to ban the clans from Mt. Weather territory.”

“It is more serious. But it’s not over. Pike and his crowd are probably going to use this defeat as part of their platform to go after the Chancellor. They won’t win the next election, or the one after that, but depending on how things go…” Raven trailed off and made a face.

“Why the glum looks?” Wick appeared, a fresh bottle of whiskey in his hand. “We’ve got some celebrating to do, people! Cheer up!”
“Look at that!” Abby grinned at the screen, “Such a healthy boy!”


Abby laughed. “Oh yeah!” She swung the screen around so that Bellamy and Echo could each see the image of their unborn son, at approximately twenty-one weeks of gestation.

Bellamy’s eyebrows went up. “Ah. Yeah. Definitely a boy.”

Then he turned and exchanged a brilliant grin with Echo, before leaning forward to gently brush his forehead against hers, tilting his chin to whisper into her ear. As she turned to look at him, Echo’s smile smoothed from something like gloating to something else that was exactly like tenderness.

Their delight was infectious and it made Abby grin. But her grin faded as she wondered just how Echo’s obvious affection for Bellamy was going to impact the difficult choices she was facing. Would it make it easier or harder for her to let him go?

Abby turned the screen back and continued taking her measurements – pretty much anything and everything that could be measured now that Echo had completed just over twenty weeks of her pregnancy. The baby boy looked to be in excellent health, everything working as it should and well grown but not so large as to be worrisome for a first time mother. There were absolutely no signs of any congenital birth defects. Abby moved on to Echo’s cervix and then finished with the placenta.

Which is where she saw something odd, and she zeroed in more closely, taking several more pictures. She looked up and saw that Bellamy and Echo were still caught up in each other, talking softly as she worked.

She cleared her throat, and once she had their attention, she gently traced a scar on Echo’s belly. “Have you had this a long time?”

“Yes,” Echo said. “It’s from a skirmish with the Sankru. When I was a girl.”

“Was it deep?”

“Yes. Very. Our healer wasn’t sure, for a while, whether or not I’d pull through.”

Both Echo and Bellamy were beginning to look concerned.

“At an angle?” Abby asked, demonstrating with her hand, still collecting information, still not sure she was certain of what she was seeing.

“Sort of. Yes. I’m not really sure anymore. Why?”

“Well. The placenta is here,” Abby placed her palm over a spot on Echo’s tummy, completely covering the scar. “And there is something a tiny bit concerning going on.”

“With the baby?”

“No, no. He’s terrific!” Abby smiled reassuringly. “With your placenta.” She swung the screen back for them. “See here? And here?” She pointed, “It looks to me like you have some blood vessels that have grown into the uterine wall. Here, where it was damaged by that sword stroke.”
She traced the scar again. “I think it must have gone deep enough to penetrate you uterus. It healed, but there is a scar there just as there is out here.” She placed her hand on Echo’s belly again. “The scar tissue interferes with the normal uterine lining, so instead of growing on top, the placenta has grown into the uterine wall.”

“What does this mean?” Echo asked, her whole body gone rigid with tension, her eyes never leaving Abby’s face.

“It means,” said Abby, “that labor and delivery could be a bit more difficult than normal. I think, right now, and we’ll keep checking often, we should plan on a caesarean delivery.”

“Like Mari had.”

“Yes. Here or at home. It should be something that your healers can do themselves. Your pharmacopeia has both anesthetics and painkillers. The surgery itself, especially when it’s planned ahead of time, is straightforward.”

“Azgeda healers would not perform this surgery. Not for labor and delivery.” Echo hesitated for only a fraction of a second before she dove off the cliff. “What would happen without it?”

Suddenly feeling a bit ashamed of herself for trying to postpone the worst news, Abby looked Echo in the eye and told her the truth. “Instead of the afterbirth slipping easily out as the uterus sheds the layer below the placenta, yours is anchored into the uterine wall. When it rips free – as it will during contractions – those blood vessels will be difficult to cauterize.”

There was a long pause, then, “I see,” said Echo, a bitter smile twisting at her lips. Abby mourned already the tender smile that had proved so fleeting. “After everything, I could still end up bleeding to death.”

“Not with a caesarian delivery. With surgery, I can remove the placenta and tie off those blood vessels in a simple, quick and thorough way. You should even be able to conceive and carry another pregnancy to full term again, if you wished too.”

“My son?” Echo asked. “Our son,” she said, her fingers gripping Bellamy’s hand so tightly her knuckles were turning white.

“He is not the problem, nor is his birth – necessarily. Though it is possible that even initial pre-labor contractions could start the ripping and tearing of those blood vessels early. Too early.” Very much too early for someone like Echo who already had a slightly damaged heart. “So, I’ll want you to be as still as you can, within reason these next few months, and we will monitor everything closely.”

“If I stay.”

“Echo. You should stay. We will deal with the fallout, whatever it is, and if it has to be asylum, you have it. My word as Chancellor.”

“I decided – we decided,” Echo glanced at Bellamy, “that I should go home. Give birth. Then fight for a formal alliance that would allow our child to be recognized by both clans, the Azgeda and the Skaikru.”

“Bellamy?” Abby looked at him in surprise.

“I won’t say I don’t hate the idea, because I do. But the alternatives all seemed worse. But now,” he looked back at Echo, and said very firmly, “now that’s not going to work.”
“If she’s telling the truth,” Echo said.

Bellamy barked a short, un-amused laugh. “Nice try, Ambassador. But Dr. Griffin doesn’t tell those kind of lies,” he looked at Abby, unformed promises floating in his eyes if she was playing games with them, “Right?”

“Right,” Abby didn’t even take it personally. These two had faced so much already. “Look, I’ll show you everything I’m seeing and we will definitely be getting Dr. Jackson and Dr. Ubo in to look, as well as anyone else you’d like to have. Okay?”

Abby turned the screen more fully to face them, and began.
Bellamy spun away from the shelves when he heard someone at the door. When he saw it was Clarke standing in the doorway, the only doorway into the armory, with him on the wrong side of it, he swore very softly.

“Hi,” she said, coming in and letting the door swing shut behind her. The latch sounded particularly loud and metallic and doom-filled, he thought.

“Hi,” he said, determined to give nothing away.

He’d been avoiding her for days. He’d see her coming from one direction and dodge down another. When he saw her hovering outside his office, he became consumed in reports and minutiae. He caught her in the corner of his eye, sitting on the edge of the bleachers in the gym as he played a pickup game of basketball over lunch. He encouraged everyone to keep playing so long they were all slightly late back to their duty stations, but Clarke had given up and departed before then.

“I’m not going to yell at you,” she said. “In case you were wondering.”

“I wasn’t.” He really wasn’t. But he sort of wished that’s why she was here. A yelling Clarke would actually be much easier for him to deal with right now than the calm, sympathetically worried one.

“Why are you down here, anyway? Just to avoid me?”

He snorted. “You’re not that special, princess.”

“Thanks.” She frowned. “What are you doing?”

“Matching inventories.”

“Why?”

“Guns are starting to show up in Trikru hands.”

“Yeah, I know,” she made an exasperated face at him. “I was at the staff meeting too. Kane’s worried.”

“He should be. They’re figuring out how to even the odds. In time maybe they’ll start thinking they’d like our nice warm fortress for themselves.”

“Fortunately, there are no signs yet that they’ve found any ammo.”

“Not yet. But that’s only a matter of time. There may be some good stocks hidden out there that they’ll come across, same as we did. Also, while they may not consult them often, they do have access to old books. They will eventually find the right ones. The ones with the directions for making gunpowder and new cartridges.”

“So why are you here now, though?” she asked.

“Making sure that – as of this moment – the black market in guns hasn’t actually breached our inventory.”
Clarke looked affronted. “You think any of our people would do that?”

“Inevitably. I grew up in Factory. Black market is a fact of life. But,” he put away his tablet, “not today.”

“That’s a relief.”

She didn’t look all that relieved. Good. Even now she still tended to overestimate the altruism of other people, people who were not her.

He asked, “Why are you really here? We had this whole conversation at the staff meeting this morning.”

She gave him a very serious look. “I wanted to know how you’re doing. You’ve got a lot going on. You’re under a lot of pressure and I wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

He looked her in the eye and smiled. “I’m fine.”

She smiled back. “You’re a liar.”

“Yeah. I think you’ve said that to me before.”

Her smile faded, and she tried a new approach. “Bellamy, this has all got to be so hard.”

Which he tried to shut down. Permanently. “Yes. But there’s not a damn thing you can do about it, so I’d really rather not talk about it with you.”

Seriously, he’d rather face another blowout with Octavia than talk with Clarke about Echo or their baby. Everything about being around Clarke outside of Ark-wide concerns still reeked of unfinished business, for him and, he suspected, for her too.

“Bellamy! We’re friends, right?”

“Are we?”

“Are you still mad at me?” The look she shot him managed to be both guilty and disgruntled.

He shrugged. “You’ve made it pretty clear that you don’t see me as a friend or a partner. And it turns out you have a thing for the Trikru Heda.”

Clarke gasped in an outraged breath, leaned forward, opened her mouth, then paused. She snapped her jaw closed, settled back on her heels and narrowed her eyes. “Really? Picking a stupid fight is the way you’re going to get out of talking about your own feelings? That’s your plan?”

He shrugged. “I’ve come up with worse plans.”

She put her hands on her hips, her best don’t-fuck-with-me expression on her face. “If not me, who?”

Bellamy wanted out of the room. Clarke was still between him and the door, and for various reasons he didn’t want to think about too closely, he didn’t want to touch her to physically move her out of the way. So he changed course.

“Fine,” he said. It wasn’t fine, but he figured he could give her a little and then run. “This whole thing has been surreal from the beginning. I thought I would never be a father. Didn’t want to be father on the Ark. Bring another kid into that shit can? No.” He shook his head. “No way.”
He looked at her, wondering if that would bug her, but she was nodding along like that made perfect sense. So he continued, “Then, once we got here, I didn’t really think about it all.”

“Really?” she broke in. “All those girls in your tent and you NEVER once thought about it?”

“What can I say? I’m an asshole. No. I didn’t.” That was absolute God’s honest truth, too. Which definitely made him an idiot, if not an asshole.

“Why did you hook up with Echo? Those same girls would still have warmed your bunk if you asked.”

Because they looked at him like he was a fucking hero. It made him sick with self-loathing. He was no hero and no one from the Ark seemed to know that other than him. “Echo held a man down so I could choke him to death. I liked that about her. And she knew what the cages were like. We didn’t have to talk about it,” he said, with a very pointed look, “but we could, you know, cope together. And I thought she was going home, when she got well. Which she did. Go home. But she came back.”

“And you let the relationship grow.”

“I did.”

“Why?”

It was so tempting to say ‘you were here and Echo was great to hide behind,’ but he didn’t say it. It wasn’t quite true and it was not at all fair. Besides, Echo had already been pregnant by then so the whole thing was moving fast in another direction. “Why not?” he said instead.

Clarke obviously thought he was being too flippant by half. “Do you even care about her?” she exclaimed.

“What kind of an asshole question is that?” He shot her a disgusted look. “Yes. I care about her. A lot, actually, thanks.”

Clarke backed down. “Sorry, that was rude.”

“You think? Look, I don’t even know why I have to tell you this. You should be able to guess. It was agonizing to recognize that the safest choice for Echo, for the baby I can feel moving when Echo is asleep, for the Ark, for all of us, was for Echo to go home. Trust her to do whatever it took to make it possible for me to have some sort of relationship with our son. My son. Who – if we were totally lucky – I might get to visit before his fifth birthday.”

Clarke didn’t say anything.

“And now – he’ll be born here, but Echo loses her entire family and at the same time, maybe we will be plunged into some kind of stupid war over it and we could all be dead long before he would ever have turned five.”

Clarke was shaking her head, but Bellamy was on a roll.

“So now, alongside being the asshole who shot Jaha and then doomed 320 people to the culling because I threw Raven’s radio in the river, I’m Bellamy Blake, the asshole who couldn’t keep it in his pants, and who drags survivors of the Ark to their final doom.”

“Bellamy, no…”
He cut her off, “You really needed me to spell that all out for you? I know you have a pretty low opinion of me, but seriously?”

“I do NOT have a low opinion of you! You **know** that! I knew that’s how you had to be feeling …”

“Oh. Good. I just had to say it all out loud to confirm your guess? Who are we helping here, Clarke? Me? Or you?”

“You! I’m worried about you! For you. For Echo and for the baby. I want to help any way I can.”

“If I ever think of something useful that you could do, trust me, I will ask.”

Clarke glared at him. “Promise?”

He figured you could mentally cross your fingers. “Promise.”

She stepped aside and Bellamy left the room.
“Clarke, I swear to God, if you don’t get out of my workshop I will beat you to death with my cane.”

“Fine!” Clarke pulled her hands back from the pile of twisted wire she had been mindlessly shredding as she fretted about, well, everything. She looked at the mess she had made and winced. “Sorry!”

“Go!” Raven’s shriek made heads turn throughout the room.

Clarke left. The last month had sucked.

It was the end of March. It was raining. Again. The snow had vanished from all but the deepest hollows and highest peaks. But nothing new was growing yet, not even down in Jaha or at the Drop Ship.

It was still cold up on the Mountain.

So everyone who wasn’t required to venture out into the mud and wet was staying inside, getting on each others’ nerves.

The people of the Ark used to know how to handle this. They used to know how to be enclosed, to live in tight quarters, to keep themselves busy. How quickly they had shed those skills!

Making her way back to her mom’s apartment – somehow Clarke had never been able to think of it as anything other than her mom’s apartment, especially after Marcus Kane all but moved in – Clarke decided it was really time to pick up and move back to Jaha. Help Monty and the other agronomists who were already nurturing spring seedlings in four new greenhouses. At least that would be a useful way of spending her nervous energy. Instead, she was pacing holes in the empty clinic’s floors hoping guiltily for new patients, or driving all her friends bonkers with her worries and fears about the Azgeda, about the Trikru, about guns and weapons and shady black market transactions. About babies and caesarian births, about Bellamy’s angry, closed off face after her really misguided – in hindsight – attempt to force him to talk with her.

Octavia assured her that he’d get over it really fast if she could just bring herself to apologize. Bellamy really did live by his code. Once disagreements were resolved, restitution made, it was over and done with. A coping skill he’d developed in a lifetime of living with his mother and sister in impossibly small quarters, and it still served him well.

The problem Clarke faced with this particular apology was that she still didn’t think she’d been wrong, not entirely, and she wasn’t sorry. It might not have been the outcome she was hoping for – which she didn’t even know what that was exactly since a heart-to-heart about feelings wasn’t necessarily the smartest thing for her and Bellamy Blake to do right now – but he needed to lash out at someone and she was as safe as it came.

“I have a different suggestion,” Kane said.

They were eating supper together at her mom’s, just the three of them. The cooks would put together baskets for people who couldn’t – or didn’t want to – eat in the mess hall. These had been very popular of late, especially for the evening meal.

Clarke shook her head. “Please. Not another research project. How much more detail can we wring
“No. No more research,” Kane said. “At least not into the AI problem. We’ve done all we can without more data. We’ve confirmed that an extremely high level AI went rogue based on various input values, locked out the designers, and triggered atomic war based on the reasoning that humans polluted the earth. No human deliberately triggered Armageddon. A human, a single human it seems, was, however, responsible for the key change allowing the AI to shake off its programmers.”

“I’ve never been so glad that there were no AI above level three on any of the space stations,” her mom said, with a quick shiver of fear for tragedies averted.

“Why weren’t there?” Clarke asked.

“Steven Hawking and Elon Musk, mostly,” Kane answered. “While their fears of AI were largely discredited as the ravings of a cranky old men, Hawking’s fame and Musk’s money insured that restricted AI was a protocol for all space stations via international agreements and treaties.”

“So Musk and Hawking were right?” Clarke laughed. “Score one for cranky old men?”

“Sort of? They both thought that AI might wipe out humans as a first step to taking over the world for themselves. That’s not what happened. By destroying the modern world, there was no more Internet, no more tech, no more replacement parts, no more power. In short, no more world that could support AI – and only a limited space for one trapped AI who has apparently been surviving by convincing the Sankru and Nomads to placate ‘her’ with scavenged parts. It’s still not entirely clear to me where our suicide man thought ‘she’ might even go.”

“Okay – so, no more on that problem for now. What kind of research are you talking about?”

“Guns. I want to get a better read on how many are actually beginning to turn up in Trikru – or other – hands. How far long they’ve gotten with solving the ammunition puzzle. I’d also like to double-check our informant’s intel. Make sure we are getting what we’re paying for.”

“Are you serious?” Clarke’s heart started beating so fast with excitement she half wondered if she might stroke out on the spot. “You’ll send me to Polis? Undercover?”

Kane looked at her mom, then back at Clarke. “Yes.”

Clarke was on her feet, hands fisted and shaking she was so excited as she breathed, “Yes, yes, yes!!”

“Not undercover, exactly, by the way. Unless you plan to color your hair, you will be spotted. But that’s okay. You’ll have official letters from us naming you a special trade envoy.”

Because he wasn’t in his office, and her mom wasn’t in her clinic, Clarke felt free to gleefully hug them both.

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Clarke left for Camp Jaha the next day, after meeting with Bellamy long enough to secure his permission/orders assigning Beale and Macton to her. And also long enough to apologize for pushing him to share his feelings even after he had told her he didn’t want to. He raised his eyebrows. “Planning on running away for good this time?”

“What? No! Why would you ask me that?” Clarke exclaimed, entirely too conscious of exactly
why he asked her that and feeling very guilty about it.

“Well, it was that or you’re dying. That’s the only reason you’d bother to apologize for something you don’t truly regret.”

“I regret it!” she insisted.

He just looked at her.

“I regret that you’re still mad at me!” she conceded.

His expression broke and he laughed. “That, I believe.”

Clarke smiled ruefully.

He sobered, but his expression was finally soft and open again. “Come home safely, when you’re done. Okay? It’s going to be a dangerous summer and I’d rather you were here.”

Her palms got hot and her cheeks flushed. She reminded herself that this was one of the upsides of leaving, this all-too present sense that if she stepped one foot wrong, their carefully balanced friendship could be shattered into a million, irretrievable pieces. “Really?”

“Really. I trust you to have my back. No matter what. And I can’t cover your back unless you’re in the same place I am.”

“I’ll be back by the first of May. I swear.” She would be, too. She would not let him down again, not by choice.

“Just don’t make me come looking for you,” he said, his best ‘I’m the big brother and you will do what I say’ expression in place.

“I won’t.” She said, pretending to imply the opposite and grinning cheekily at him. Then she hugged him quickly and left, her excitement at finally having something to do rising with every step out of the mountain she took.

She and her team departed Camp Jaha for TonDC the following morning. She paid a courtesy call on Indra, just to let her know she was passing through. She also asked for directions to visit Duncan.

“Wanheda.” Duncan stepped back to let her into his small house.

“Don’t call me that. Call me Clarke.”

“It’s an honorable title.”

“It implies I’m a heda. I’m not.”

Duncan looked at Beale and Macton.

“They’ve been assigned to me. They’re supposed to be under my command, but I’m pretty sure they have sealed orders giving them permission to save my life however they think best, even if it means stuffing me in a sack and carrying me back to the mountain against my will.”

Macton kept his face as still as always, and he could seriously out-still Lincoln, but Beale cracked and choked back a laugh.
Clarke jerked her thumb at Beale. “See?”

“What do you want of me, Clarke Griffin?” Duncan asked.

“I understand you know a man from Polis,” she paused. “Oskair, he’s called.”

If she hadn’t been staring at him, looking for his tell, she would have missed the quick tension in his jaw.

“He asked after you,” Clarke answered his unvoiced question. “That’s how I know. Anyway, I’d like to find him, in Polis. I’m hoping you’d be our guide.”

“Why would I do that?”

“I spared your life when I could have taken it. You declined to fight me for it when you finally walked again. So, by my accounting, it still belongs to me.”

Again, if she hadn’t been watching, if she hadn’t had months and months of practice learning to read Lincoln, she’d have missed it, the quick ghost of a smile passing over his face.

“Learning to play, little Skaikru girl?”

“Yes.”

He nodded. “For now, until I fight you for it, my life belongs to you.”

The following afternoon, thirty kilometers out from TonDC, in an unbroken stretch of winter forest, a hooded man rode out of the trees just ahead of them. He halted, blocking the track.

They pulled up their mounts (and boy was Clarke wishing she’d taken Echo up on her offer of riding lessons over the winter because Good God did her ass and her legs hurt) and the man pulled back his hood.

Face like a hawk, bright blue eyes, winter-pale skin, long brown hair. Completely unbraided. A startlingly white smile against his short, dark beard.

“Wanheda,” he said, bowing his head in greeting.

The men around her tensed, hands reaching for their weapons, but Clarke kicked her horse forward, thrusting her arm out to signal for her men to stop.

“Roan,” she said. “I asked you to stop calling me that a long time ago.”

“I see that you did not clear your ledger.” He jerked his chin at Duncan.

“Yes. I did. I claimed his life in my service.”

“That is not the price we agreed upon.” Roan’s arctic blue glare was as cold as the metaphor implied.

“Then we must negotiate a new price. But I warn you, if you take him from my service, you will owe me in turn.”

“Or,” and he raised the small crossbow he’d been keeping under his cloak, “I could just kill you instead.”
Clarke held her head high and laughed. It was a little forced, but a solid effort all the same. “If you wanted me dead Roan of no clan, I would be. You could have killed me with that from the trees and escaped long before now if that’s all you wanted.”

He didn’t laugh in turn, but after a few more seconds, he did slip out the bolt, loosen the string, and hang the crossbow back on his saddle. “Then let us talk and ride, Clarke Griffin. You can start by telling me, what is your life worth to you now?”

They kicked their horses into motion and rode on in not at all companionable silence. Beale and Macton couldn’t for the life of them figure out if she was in danger or not, so they decided to shrug their rifles off their backs and ride with them under their arms, that much closer to being fired. Duncan knew Roan all too well. Duncan didn’t carry a gun, so instead he pulled his ax off his belt and rode with it his hand, ready to toss at a moment’s notice.

And Roan? Roan was as skilled a killer as any adult Trikru warrior, maybe even more skilled than most. He bore nearly thirty scars on his shoulder. She’d counted them, one by one, by the light of a fire, on a night that seemed to have happened to someone else in a different story a long time ago and far, far away. Only he was right beside her, in the here and now and she had no idea how to get them all through the next few hours alive.

Her entire mission could be over before it started because her track record for being a fucking magnet for the Earth’s most excruciatingly mistimed romantic encounters looked to be unbroken after all.

Shit.
A different story, from a long time ago and far, far away.

The Brave Princess:
A True Tale of Danger, Adventure, and Magic in the Land of the Dark Elves

It begins:

Once upon a time, there was a girl.

No.

Once upon a time, there was a Princess.

She was courageous, and strong, and determined, if not always very wise. She grew up loved and loving, and knew that when her time came she would rule as well and as carefully as her parents and their parents before them.

Then tragedy struck.

Her father discovered that their kingdom was dying.

A noble and honest man, he wished to tell the people the truth. She loved her father, believed he was in the right. But others among the ruling kind feared that way led only to despair and madness. They executed him to preserve the terrible secret, to keep the people ignorant, but content.

Rather than execute the Princess, they sent her into exile. They sent her far out beyond the edges of the known world. She awoke in a small village lost in the heart of a mighty forest, armed only with her wits and with science.

She fought the forest, which was dangerous in ways she didn’t understand, filled with a deep magic and with Dark Elves who resisted wit and denied science. She fought the villagers, who like her had been exiled from the kingdom for many and various crimes against the peace of the people, who were angry and wild and going to die if she didn’t take care of them, whether they wanted her to or not. She fought their leader, a hard man who was not amused to discover that an imperious Princess had arrived in their midst. She fought the Dark Elves themselves, who claimed the whole of the forest as their own and were determined to eradicate the strangers from the kingdom who had arrived uninvited in their lands.

In time, she gained the respect and trust of the village leader and his people. Defeated the magic of the forest. And saved her village by destroying nearly every member of the host of Dark Elves who came to kill them in a great blaze of unquenchable fire.

Then, in her moment of triumph, the Princess lost her village to Fell Wizards. They seized it for themselves through trickery and deceit.

The source of the Wizards’ power was the magic of the Dark Elves, drained along with their blood and consumed by the Wizards to make them strong. The Wizards, believing that the people of her
village, of the kingdom, had even greater magic, planned to consume them as well. The Princess swore that she would stop at nothing, not even death, to save them.

Through many perilous and terrible adventures, the Princess reunited with her mother and what was left of their kingdom. They allied with the Dark Elves to defeat their common foe. To seal the alliance the Princess offered up as a sacrifice a boy of her own kind she had come to love, and when that was not enough, she offered up entire villages. She marched her army of Dark Elves to the very door of the Wizards’ keep, drawing the enemy’s eye to give her greatest champion his best, most desperate chance to sneak into their fortress and destroy their magic from within.

Then the Dark Elves betrayed them. Took their own kind and left the Kingdom’s people to die at the hands of the Wizards.

At the last bitter end, the Princess had only her wits, and her science, and her champion. She and her champion, her old village leader revealed at last as the hero in disguise, together destroyed the magic and defeated the Wizards. They burned the Wizards and all their kind, down to the youngest child, still swaddled in his nursery.

Her people – her tattered remnant of a people, refugees from the kingdom and from the village – were saved, but the Princess had finally learned her father’s last, most terrible secret. Science, like magic, demands a price.

The Princess could not let her people pay, not when she could make that payment for them. So once more she went into the forest.

Deep in the wilderness, she lay down and waited for science to take its due.

Only a Dark Rider stopped it. He shot a simple, homely arrow through the eye of science and the Princess lived. But she was not saved. He was a Dark Elf, one so hard and restless and dangerous that his own kind had cast him out, not wanting his anger and violence in their own villages and clans.

He rejected all codes of honor as petty encumbrances designed to ensnare the strong. He bargained with her for her own life with a knife held to her throat, mocked her belief that science could beat magic, derided her tales of the Kingdom as nothing but the grand delusions of a silly girl child.

“Princess,” he said with a cruel laugh, “Princess of what? This rock? That fallen tree?”

“Princess of myself,” she answered. Holding her chin high and hoping he did not see her tears.

She tried to fight him, but he was too smart and too strong and he knocked her to the ground time and again, toying with her the way predators toyed with their prey. She tried to run, heading deeper into the forest and hoping it would take him before it took her, but he was wily in the ways of the deep magic, and each time he caught her. Told her he would surely punish her for running by taking her life. The next time. Or the one after that.

Science saved her once again.

She watched and learned and bided her time, until she believed she understood enough of his deep magic that she could outrun it. Outrun him.

She agreed to the deal he had demanded, his blade at her throat, agreed that she owed him a life debt to be repaid at his choosing.

And that was that. He stepped back and told her she was free to go.
She turned to face the forest, and realized she was lost.

“I do not know the way,” she said.

“Then we will bargain for a new price, and I will take you where you want to go.”

The price was stories.

She told him stories of the kingdom, of the village, of the stars, of art, and music, of science and history, while they walked through the forest. She answered all his questions, defended her people when he made disparaging remarks. Even after she realized he was saying cruel things just to make her talk more.

Around them the days passed and the forest began to turn from green to gold and autumn appeared around them. At last they paused near a lake as deep and blue as the color of his eyes.

“Tomorrow,” he said, “you will see a landmark you know and you will be able to travel the rest of the way on your own.”

“I will miss your company,” she said. And it was true.

“And I, yours,” he said. She thought it was a lie, but he was very close and when she looked into his face she saw something she had not seen before. He was not an Elf. He was a man.

They lay together that night, under the stars, for the first and last time. He was strong and rough, and beautiful and scarred, and he left her shaking and crying because it was so good and not enough and she needed more only she didn’t know what. Then with his hands and his lips and his teeth and his tongue he showed her and she found a kind of magic she’d heard of but never quite believed in. He invited her to touch and taste and explore and take anything else she wanted from him, and he gave her the names she hadn’t known for things she’d never dreamed of.

In the morning he was gone, an arrow made of small rocks pointing the way she wished to travel.

Clarke glared across the evening campfire. She had been so excited to be free of the mountain, even for a little while. To have a job of her own to do. To be away from all the confusing and irritating feelings stirred up by Bellamy, by her mother, by things she couldn’t have, and couldn’t control.

All of it, every damn bit, dried up and blown away the moment Roan crossed her path.

Again.

About the time they stopped to make camp for the night, Roan had grown bored with the silent, looming approach. He’d switched up to needling Duncan, Beale and Macton instead. Mocking them about serving the mountain, serving a Skaikru Wanheda, about how abandoning their people made them no better than himself, and wasn’t it nice to have friends again.

She’d eventually decided, when she’d known him before, that at least one of the reasons his clan had thrown him out was that he could not shut up. Violating what she’d thought of as a cultural imperative for his people every day, with every fiber of his being. Silence, unless he was actively hunting, was one of his least favorite things. But where some might choose to fill the empty spaces with humor or lectures or songs or a shared obsession, Roan liked to fill it by making others uncomfortable. It was childish and silly and unbecoming in a warrior. Finally at the end of her patience and embarrassed for her men that they had to put up with this because she had to endure it,
she told him exactly that. Roan looked her right in the eye and told her he could think of other things to do with his mouth if she’d really like him to be quiet, though he wouldn’t guarantee the same for her.

There was a horrifying ten seconds when she realized she was remembering the feel of his hands and his tongue and it made her blood run hot and her skin flush and she was appalled to realize she was actually imagining doing it all over again. He saw it all, of course, which made him laugh like dying crow.

“What do you want?” she finally wailed. “I’m not going to kill anyone for you, but other than that anything to make you go away is good for me.”

“You are a very sorry example of a Wanheda.”

“You’re a very sorry example of a ….” she tried to say too many things at once – man, warrior, Trikru, grounder, person – and ended up just spluttering helplessly.

“I think,” he said, after she ran down, and looking around very slowly at the four of them, “I think my price will be to accompany you on your journey, and then accompany you back to your mountain. I wish to learn more about the people who have turned the world upside down.”

At that point, all three of her sworn men (who was she kidding, one man sworn to her, two to Bellamy, but they were going to win Duncan over before long, she just knew it) burst into torrents of Trigedasleng, too fast and guttural and angry for Clarke to make much sense of it. It was plenty clear enough, however, that they were insisting that this was a terrible idea and absolutely would not be happening.

Roan ignored them all, kept his eyes on Clarke. Measuring and waiting.

“Fine,” she said finally, “but with the understanding that if you do anything, anything at all to jeopardize our mission, Duncan, Beale, and Macton all have my permission to kill you on the spot.”

“They can try,” Roan said, his white teeth flashing bright by the light of the fire.

Chapter End Notes

If you're curious, and not a spolier junkie like me, Roan is a real character who will added to season 3, and (the actor who plays him) looks like this. He's been described as a 'scoundrel.' After that, everything is on me. ;-}
“So,” Roan said, bringing his horse up alongside of hers the next morning. The road to Polis was, quite unfortunately as far as Clarke was concerned, plenty wide enough for two to ride abreast. “You decided to return home.”

“Obviously.” She had learned, the hard way, that ignoring him only encouraged him to try more outrageous stratagems to get her talking.

“Before or after winter set in?"

“Why do you care?"

“I don’t care, I’m just interested. I’m also bored. Riding on roads is boring. Entertain me, Scheherazade.”

“I can’t believe I ever told you that story.”

“Why? It’s a good story. I actually found an illustrated copy of some of her tales. 1001 nights. I liked Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, myself.”

Clarke gawked at him.

“What? You didn’t think I could read?”

“No!” Clarke was still gob-smacked. Imagining Roan with a book was harder than imagining John Murphy with a book. “I know clansmen read. I just didn’t know YOU read anything.”

“All warriors read,” he corrected her, with the stress on ‘warriors.’ “Some others, if they are determined. And I like to read, when I find something interesting.”

“Where do you find books?”

“There are book dealers in Polis.”

Clarke grinned, anticipation rising. “Like, actual book shops?”

“No,” he shook his head regretfully. Almost like he wished for himself that such shops did exist. “Probably not the kind you’re thinking of, from the old stories. Books are,” he paused, “not officially sanctioned. Not banned either, just not sanctioned.”

Her excitement plummeted, replaced with minor interest at new information about the clans. “Why?”

“Speaking English is a skill reserved for warriors, taught with books. We learn English by learning to read from old textbooks that lay out the rules of grammar. All so we can practice conversational English so that we may speak more easily with strangers. Or, if it becomes absolutely necessary, write a very brief letter. That’s all. Other than that, it is deemed an,” he paused, searching for a word, “an affectation of the educated and useless.” He smirked at her, pleased with his vocabulary. “Books would just encourage bad behavior.”

Books certainly had encouraged bad behavior on the Ark, but every time someone proposed restricting access, someone else reminded the would-be censor that they were the Ark, and that
knowledge forbidden was knowledge forgotten.

“So how do some warriors come to speak English so much more fluently than others?” Clarke asked.

Roan leaned closer. “How many languages do you speak, Clarke Griffin?”

Not as many as she should have. She’d taken all the basic requirements on the Ark, Spanish and Portuguese, French, Russian, Chinese, Japanese and Swahili, but she was more interested in the art electives so she dropped alternate languages as soon as she could. Before she became fluent in any of them. It had been one of the few arguments she’d ever had with her father about her school choices. She didn’t recall telling Roan that story, but God only knew what he’d managed to put together from her ramblings.

Then there were her ongoing struggles to become truly fluent in Trigedasleng. Which she didn’t want to think about right now.

“Before the snow,” she said, ducking the language question. “I returned to my people before the snow came.”

He leaned back, a knowing smile on his lips. Clarke smiled back, annoyed by how easily he unsettled her and determined to give him as little satisfaction as possible.

“I’m glad,” he said. “I did not think you would do well, alone in the winter.”

“Where do you go, in the winter?” she asked, choosing to glide right over his – possibly justified – low opinion of her survival skills.

“And did you apologize to your mother?” he countered.

“Yes. I did.” Why oh why oh why did I tell him about my mother?? she wailed inside her own head. He just asked her if her parents had survived the earthfall. A simple ‘mom, yes’ and ‘dad, no,’ would have been enough. But one thing had led to another and he got the whole story out of her, complete with him deciding to enter so enthusiastically into her side of the argument that she ended up by defending her mother to him. What right did he, who’d never met her mother or lived on the Ark, have to judge her mother’s choices? Or her mother’s love?

“That is wise. One should always be on good terms with one’s mother.”

“Who told you that?”

“My mother.”

Clarke just snorted. Like Roan listened to his mother. If he listened to his mother, he wouldn’t be Roan the outcast. Roan the shunned. Roan the idiot.

“And your warrior? Did you apologize to him?” Roan continued.

“Okay, I know I NEVER mentioned him to you.” Because once she started, she knew she’d never stop talking about Bellamy, and she had no desire to talk to Roan about him at all.

Roan chuckled. “No. You didn’t. So I was curious if you’d acknowledge him now.”

Clarke closed her eyes and swore a long list of swears in several languages. About the only thing she could do without concentrating. How gossip about Bellamy and her had spread so far she had
no idea, except that gossip was clearly the fastest, if the least accurate, way for information to travel in all the known universe. “I hate you. I hate you more than I have ever hated another man in my life.”

“That isn’t true, and we both know it.” He didn’t say which part he thought wasn’t true, and Clarke had no desire to ask.

“Why doesn’t your old heda employ you to pry information out of people? You are too damn good at it,” Clarke grumbled instead.

“Who is to say my heda doesn’t?”

Clarke stared at him for a long time, all kinds of new thoughts running through her head. “Now I can’t possibly cut you free, can I?”

Roan’s teeth flashed white again. “No. You can’t.”
Polis didn’t really live up to the hype, at least as far as Clarke was concerned.

It was sort of a blown up version of TonDC. Lots of shacks – instead of a few shacks – mostly constructed out of odds and ends of recycled cars and various lightweight plastic-looking sheets of repurposed scrap. Closer to the center it had a few dozen, larger, older brick or masonry buildings shoddily patched and with moss on the roofs and the tumbled skeletons of last summer’s weeds growing out of the gutters.

Roan must have seen the disappointment on her face. “More of it is underground, in the old civil defense tunnels that sheltered the people after the Cataclysm. But those look like the ones in TonDC.” He gave her a meaningful look. “You know. Before they got blown up.”

The city did have straight roads – an old street grid underlying the more recent habitations – and it did have market squares and big storehouses and city wells. There were also plenty of mature trees on street corners, just beginning to bud. There was even an old city park. The trees gave the whole place a pleasanter feel to what could have been a bare, dirty city. The people in the streets seemed well enough fed and she finally saw lots and lots of children.

“The crèches are here,” Duncan said, in response to her question. Roan had already disappeared, saying he would find them later but he had business of his own. He also warned them that, whatever they did, they needed to keep their guns hidden and safe. Beale and Macton were too busy watching for potential threats to her safety to do more than grunt when she asked them any questions. She tried to feel grateful for their presence, but it mostly irked her, like an itchy sweater too close to her skin. Or the way her hair was pulled tight, up and away from her face, bundled under a knit cap, and her neck swathed in a generous scarf. A mild form of disguise the men had insisted on before they rode into town.

“Crèches?” she asked Duncan.

“Once children are weaned from the milk mothers – around three years old – most are brought to the city to be sheltered and trained for their tasks in life.”

Clarke longed to ask more questions, but Duncan said, “Turn left at the next corner. There is a stable there where we can put the horses until we need them again.”

Oskair’s headquarters were terribly ordinary as far as Clarke was concerned. She had hoped something far more dramatic and ostentatious. Something that suited an urban crime lord. Instead it was just a house, very simply furnished. Spartan, even. Lexa’s command tent had far more luxury on display.

Oskair greeted Duncan with wary familiarity, and Clarke, once she pulled off her hat and scarf, with eager curiosity. “And how is Sarah?” he asked her, once their formal introductions were complete.

“Sarah?” Clarke asked, nonplussed by the unfamiliar name.

“Sarah Monroe. I hope to see her in Polis one of these days.”

Clarke had forgotten what Monroe’s first name was; she never used it by her own preference as far as Clarke knew. She’d also forgotten that Bellamy delegated the actual haggling to her. Apparently she was memorably good at it. “She’s fine. Busy.”
“What can I do for you, daughter of the Skaikru heda?”

Clarke explained to Oskair that she was on a mission from her mother to gather more information about the drugs and other healing and medicinal herbs the Trikru made.

“Other medicinal herbs?” Oskair asked, “Of the more recreational variety, perhaps?”

“Perhaps.”

“Trying to better understand your competition?”

Clarke shrugged. “Knowledge, it is said, is a form of power.”

“Knowledge, the clans say, is dangerous.”

Oskair, she realized was dead serious. “Yes,” she agreed. “So is power.”

Oskair didn’t smile, exactly, but he managed to imply a wintry smile all the same. The hairs on the back of Clarke’s neck stood up. *Polis* was dangerous, she reminded herself, and she needed to act accordingly and avoid being flippant when she didn’t know the stakes.

Starting from the names and directions Oskair gave, she and Beale and Macton and Duncan spent the next two days visiting herbalists who grew sketchier and sketchier as they went. Macton had charge of their supply of kaf, and based on what she observed he drove hard bargains when purchasing samples. This was also part of what they were trying to learn – how much was Oskair pocketing from their deal. The answer seemed to be a decent but not outrageous percentage.

From all these visits Clarke became convinced that while some of the bigger outfits had the skills and capacities to make propellants for the kinds of guns that were being recovered, they weren’t set up to do it yet. She also saw no stockpiles of coke, or coal, or lime – or really any raw minerals. Whatever limited smelting was going on in the small manufacturing district appeared to be entirely focused on recycling older finished goods rather than working with new metals.

So she turned her attention to scrap metal dealers. She was looking particularly for copper – as that was the best for cartridges and casings. In a pinch aluminum could be made to work, though it would foul gun barrels over time. For these trips she simply said she was empowered to purchase for the mountain, and she was looking over stocks for what was available in quantity. Again, it seemed to her that many of the dealers could make cartridges if they had decent modes to work from, but that at least at present, they weren’t. They seemed to do their biggest business in knives – small to sword-sized – and cooking tools, small repairs, and building supplies.

She already knew there were no arrow makers. Hunters were responsible for their own. Roan had assiduously recovered every arrow he shot, including the one he shot through Emerson’s eye. A grisly process she’d rather forget, if only she could. If the shaft was damaged he broke off the head and feathers and saved them. Then, later, when his supply was low, he spent a day making new arrows with replacement shafts he’d apparently had all along, stored in his quiver.

She assumed it was because he was outcast, but he assured her all hunters made their own. It was a point of pride. She said it seemed like a lot of work. He laughed.

They stayed with a family Oskair sent them too, a small, carved sigil to offer as proof and promise of compensation of some sort, Clarke gathered. Polis had not yet (re)developed any system of paid lodging for visitors, so the four of them were simply guests, bunking two to a bed in a small room under their eaves. (More evidence for Kane that while travel clearly was possible, the average Trikru or members of other clans didn’t travel much.) They had left their guns – rifles, shotguns
and pistols – with Oskair for safekeeping. Roan still hadn’t shown up. Clarke hoped that meant they were rid of him for good, but knew there was no way in hell she’d be that lucky.

On the third day, she and Macton were heading back to their lodgings after a last visit to a small metal worker’s workshop, when they realized they were being followed.

Macton didn’t swear, because Macton spoke no more than absolutely necessary, but she could feel the pre-fight tension begin rolling off him in waves. Duncan and Beale were off negotiating for some repairs for their saddles. They’d decided at breakfast that since the scrap metal dealers were all perfectly sanctioned, there was no reason for her to need more than one escort – and all four of them looked more conspicuous than not anyway. Right now she’d be happy to be conspicuous.

“We’re being herded,” Macton said in a near whisper, his fingers tightening like an iron band around her upper arm.

“Shit,” Clarke whispered back, her heart already thumping with adrenaline.

And they turned into a blind alley.

It was like being trapped in an old action film, the kind Wells had loved so much when they were kids.

Two men dropped down from the roofs above – Trikru and their affection for heights again – and four more converged on the alley entrance.

She pulled her long knife, since they’d all decided even a handgun for her would be a mistake, too tempting a target for theft. Macton pulled a knife and his sword, and back-to-back, they prepared to make capturing them as painful as they could.

Then Clarke spotted a door. “To your left,” she said.

The door was locked, but the frame was rotted and gave easily under Macton’s boot. Like all the other cellars they’d visited on their tour of the sketchiest herbalists in Polis, this one was connected to the tunnel network. They’d learned to read the signage on the intersections, half-graffiti, half-hieroglyphs, pointing them in various directions, but the daylight vents were few and far between here, so mostly they chased daylight, the pounding feet of their pursuers charging along behind them.

In the end, they were caught. They were run to ground in another blind corner, by accident rather than design, but it sucked all the same. Clarke stepped in front of Macton. “What do you want?” she asked, in hopefully not entirely undecipherable Trigedasleng.

“Komba roun oso,” was clear enough, when their leader spoke.

“Macton comes, too, unharmed,” Clarke said, in English, “or I’m going nowhere without a fight. Some of you will live, but some of you will die if it comes to that.”

After she and Macton handed over their weapons, they were herded along underground. They travelled for several blocks as far as Clarke could tell, ending up in another cellar. This one had windows that actually peeked up to the level of the road. Five of their abductors stayed in the room. One left, to presumably to report in.

They hadn’t waited but a few minutes when they heard thuds, scuffling, and a muffled yell from the floor above. The five men pulled their weapons and faced the door, clearly uncertain about what was happening. The door flew open and a man was propelled through it, wind-milling his
arms against the force of whatever pushed him from behind. While the newcomer distracted everyone, Roan followed him in. Almost too quickly for Clarke to follow what he did, Roan spun to his right, slashed the throat of the first man he saw, then threw his axe into the chest of another. The third man got his sword in front of himself, but Roan, momentum driving his moves, dodged the blow, caught his arm and flipped him to the ground, then drove the stranger’s own blade into his chest.

Macton woke before Clarke did, and took out the man to his right, snapping his neck with a crack that was somehow audible despite the rest of the noise.

The last man came to his senses and turned to grab for Clarke, but she dropped low and rolled out of his way, allowing Roan to get him from behind, his long knife at the assailant’s throat.

Beale came charging in at that point, almost casually knocking the first man, Roan’s distraction, back to his knees before driving his knife into the man’s neck.

“He was already dying,” Roan said.

“Fuk yu,” said Beale, in a phrase that required no translation.

“Duncan?” Roan asked.

Beale simply gestured at the ceiling, indicating somewhere on the floor(s) above.

Roan sliced the throat of the man he was holding, then dropped the body to the ground.

“Roan!” Clarke cried in outrage, having already rolled back to her own feet.

“What?”

“Why did you do that? The fight was over!”

“No.” He looked to Macton, “Bring her.”

Macton had the good sense not to touch her, but he did come up behind her and gesture for her to precede him out the door.

On the floor above they found Duncan, his naked sword in his lap, sitting perched on the edge of a table in a room in disarray, two more bodies on the ground, and one last man on his knees in front of him.

Roan stepped around into the kneeling man’s direct line of sight. “Haukom yu jak op dis on Wanheda?”

The kneeling man hawked up a mouthful of what turned out to be blood and spat it on the ground at Duncan’s feet.

Roan came forward, a pleasant smile on his face, and said something low and soft and smooth and the man visibly recoiled.

Clarke looked to Macton, who shrugged and translated roughly, “He promised to feed the man’s children to the puana.”

“He wouldn’t do that!” Clarke whispered disparagingly. “What kind of threat is that?”

Macton looked at her. “He has done this.”
Clarke aghast, whispered, “He did not!”

“Yes. He did.”

The kneeling man must have heard that story too, because he started to talk. Macton translated quietly into Clarke’s ear as the man said that they had planned to ransom the Wanheda to the mountain in exchange for weapons. For guns.

“Thank you,” Roan said. Then he drove his machete into the man’s belly, twisted it firmly, then bracing his foot against the man’s chest, he pulled his weapon free with a quick yank.

“Why did you do that?” Clarke exclaimed, horrified all over again. “They didn’t hurt us! He answered your questions!”

“People need to know not to try and touch the Wanheda of the Skaikru,” Roan said, not even looking up from cleaning his blade on the man’s coat.

“Isn’t murder against the law?” she asked, trying desperately to find some point of reference to hang on to.

Roan stood up and looked curiously at her. “What law, Clarke?”

She tried not to flinch. It was first time Roan had used her name since they met him on the road.

“Your law, Trikru law?”

“We don’t have law in that way.” He sheathed his machete, “And didn’t you tell me once that on the Ark, all crimes were capital crimes?”

“Well, what was his crime?”

“Attacking and abducting the Wanheda of the Skairkru.”

“And who are you to be the judge of that?”

He smiled grimly. “Roan.”

Before any of them could move or speak, heavy feet came thumping into the house and armed men with their swords drawn poured in.

“The Heda would like to see you now,” said the oldest, in English, as he came to a stop in front of Clarke.
“Lexa,” said Clarke.

“Clarke,” said Lexa, acknowledging Clarke’s greeting with a slight bow of her head.

To Clarke’s surprise, they weren’t in any kind of formal throne room. She was almost disappointed. She’d been wondering what kind of throne Lexa sat on when she was home. How it would stack up in comparison to the elaborate, twinning-roots chair some poor bearer got stuck carting around the wilderness for her.

Instead, Lexa had all five of them escorted directly to a smaller receiving room.

Standing in the ruins of the thieves’ den, Clarke had immediately claimed all four men with her as her own, working directly for the Mountain. It was true for Macton and Beale, who actually had copies of their orders with them. It was true enough for Duncan. Roan the outcast was the one who worried her most, what Lexa’s guards might do to him after he’d come to her defense. Lexa’s captain had narrowed his eyes, but after Roan offered him a brief nod and a smile, he’d shrugged and grunted his agreement. Possibly merely his awareness, but either way was fine with Clarke. As they left the house, she hissed at all four of them to let her do all the talking. She said this mostly to Roan, of course. The very idea that the other three would voluntarily offer a word in their own defense was ludicrous.

The room they were escorted to was bare but for a few scattered benches and chairs, with an old, heavily-carved wooden sideboard along one wall. If Clarke hadn’t completely misread the structures in the twilight as they’d been hurried through the streets, the room’s windows overlooked what must have once been a quadrangle of an old university campus. The room was lit with the usual racks of pillar candles. Which reminded Clarke that she wanted to find the chandleries. Just to satisfy her own damn curiosity about the source of the apparently endless supplies of uniform pillar candles that marked Lexa’s presence.

Lexa’s face was clean, her winter pale skin more porcelain-like than Clarke had imagined it might be. Her thick, glossy brown hair was as elaborately braided as always, and her distinctive three-buckle, waist-cinching belt was fastened around a loose black tunic over her usual slim leggings and high boots. Her tunic was trimmed with intricate embroidery and beadwork around the neck and up the long cuffs, in an abstract pattern made from shells or seeds. Clarke hoped it was shells, anyway, recalling Lincoln’s scarf with the gruesome bone detailing.

Lexa was standing and facing the door as the five of them entered, alone but for a single bodyguard.

Clarke hoped this was a good sign.

Of course, Lexa wasn’t talking. Just waiting for Clarke to speak. Which was, Clarke felt, a less than good sign. “You look well,” she finally settled on.

“As do you,” Lexa replied, a faint smile tugging at her full lips.

“Yeah, well, a little running for my life, a few abductions, a fight to the death … always does wonders for my skin.”

Lexa actually laughed softly. “I’ve missed your humor, Clarke Griffin.”
“Really?” Clarke said, genuinely surprised. She honestly couldn’t remember trying to be funny, ever, in Lexa’s presence.

“My people treat me with such deference that, sometimes, they forget that I’m human too.”

“That girl you brought to the Solstice celebration seemed to be clear about you being human.” Clarke immediately regretted having that fall out of her mouth. Maybe she was a bit more shaken by the last few hours than she realized. It also undid all the good of pretending she hadn’t noticed at the time. Of course, Bellamy had noticed her not noticing, so maybe she hadn’t been as slick as she thought, and why was she worried about this now?

“Oh,” Lexa said, “Dyna is an old crèche-sis.” And she actually seemed to be blushing faintly.

At which point Roan intruded on their conversation with a sudden guffaw. “Oh, little sister,” he said, in English, clapping his hands and grinning in unfeigned delight. “You have no idea how much it pleases me to know I got there first.”

Then he actually stuck out the tip of his tongue and tapped it along the bottom of his upper lip a few times, finishing off with one of the most gleefully, wickedly mean smiles Clarke had ever had the misfortune to see, before starting to laugh.

“First!?!” Lexa looked shocked.

“Sister!?!?” Clarke swiveled her head back and forth between them, her feet rooted the floor in sudden horror, all sorts of information about Roan falling into a new, potentially better-fitting portrait.

Lexa’s expression hardened into barely contained anger. She glared at a still-chortling Roan, her brother (?!), and snapped, “Go.” She jerked her chin at Clarke’s men. “Take them too. I’ll find you when I want you.”

She also waved her hand at her bodyguard. “Leave us.”

Once they were alone, Clarke looked back at Lexa and raised her brow. “Sister?”

“Half-sister. Different fathers. First?”

Clarke’s initial impulse was to say it was none of Lexa’s business. And a very small, very petty part of her was happy to say, with all the apparent blitheness she could muster, “I met Roan when I was traveling alone in the wilderness. Last fall. It was just one of those things. Outcast to outcast. You know.”

“I have never travelled alone in the wilderness, nor have I been cast out. So no, I don’t know.”

Clarke just shrugged, then finally managed to move away, drifting over to take a seat on a nearby bench. Her legs had started to tremble, delayed reaction to the afternoon’s events finally setting in.

“Then I probably can’t explain it to you,” she said, knowing that this was the God’s honest truth.

Lexa turned away and moved to the dark window. Clarke had no idea what she could see but her own faint reflection. “Why didn’t you come to me, when you arrived in Polis?”

“I had business to attend to first. I was going to call on you, tomorrow, or maybe the day after that, once my activities were completed.” Also true. She hadn’t wanted to risk being assigned some sort of guide/guard, which she was mostly sure would have happened if she’d presented herself to Lexa
as soon as she entered the city. But that didn’t mean she planned to leave the city without paying a formal call on the Commander.

“You should have called on me first.”

“Why? Do I need your permission to be in Polis?” No one had said she did, but the Clans still often assumed that the Arkers would just know common, everyday things, despite having fallen from the sky less than a year ago. Like, perhaps, you needed some sort of permission to be wandering around Polis.

“No, but as an official representative of your people, it would be a courtesy.” Lexa managed to sound both mildly hurt and politically offended.

“I have no rank with my people anymore. I’m here to do some business for my mother as our chief healer, and for our engineers. Not for politics or diplomacy.”

“You have no rank? I don’t believe that.”

“No, I don’t.” Clarke frowned in confusion. Lexa had definitely been there at the Solstice. “You knew that.”

“You are Wanheda,” Lexa said, sounding somehow both insistent and insulted.

“To the Clans, perhaps. To the people of the Ark? At best I am the daughter of the Heda. Otherwise, I’m just a healer in training.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

Clarke could only shrug. Being responsible for one hundred teenagers had been horrible, and more than half of them had died in less than two months under her charge. She was not ready to be responsible for an entire people and she knew it. Which was, she reflected in a spark of fresh insight, perhaps why Lexa and the other clan leaders were still so ridiculously hopeful that she was in charge now. She straightened up and crossed her legs, folding her hands on her knee and somehow feeling much better about her position.

“What is your business in Polis?” Lexa asked after a moment.

“We are still trying to understand all the ways the cataclysm altered plant life, and how to make the best use of the new compounds. Your healers have developed an impressive array of medicines and,” Clarke smiled with undisguised bitterness, “poisons.”

“You could ask.”

“We have. But Tondc has no fully trained healer or herbalist at the moment. So we wanted to see what was for sale here in Polis.”

“And the metal dealers you visited?”

Clarke caught, but decided to ignore, the information that Lexa had known at least something of her activities over the last three days. “Our mechanics and engineers are planning for our summer construction season. They wanted to know what kinds of materials might be available here.”

“What will you offer to trade for them?”

“That’s part of what I’m trying to learn – what goods we have access to that your metal dealers
might like, or want in exchange, and what values they place on various types of supplies.”

“Kaf, for instance.”

“Perhaps,” Clarke saw no reason to pretend they weren’t in the Kaf business. They sold it openly at the exchange at the Mountain. “But not every metal dealer is interested, so we spoke of other things as well.”

“All of this would have been easier with my help.”

“Would it, though?” Clarke said, “We would like to trade directly with the merchants, and pay fairly. It seems to me that your direct involvement would make that more difficult.”

“You should have come to me.”

“Me, personally? The Wanheda? Or any merchant from Mt. Weather looking for trade?”

Lexa looked at her for a long time, seriously considering her answer to an important question. Finally she said, “You. Or anyone else visiting with a direct commission from your Heda, in any of her roles.”

“Noted,” Clarke said. Then she stood up and fished in her inside pocket, bringing out the packet of folded and heavily sealed papers she held there. Kane had gone to the trouble of finding ribbons and sealing wax and having an Ark Insignia seal and stamps made up. Clarke had thought it silly, but had learned that Kane’s attention to performance tended to be well received by the clans.

She handed over the small and, she had to acknowledge, impressively dramatic packet. “I am designated an official trade envoy from the Ark, in case it became necessary. I present you my papers, Heda.”

Lexa received them with a formal nod, then carried them over to tall, multi-candled stand and ripped open the seals. The paper inside was also elaborate – Clarke thought it looked like someone had decided to use a different font and size for nearly every word of the brief missive – and signed with a flourish by her mother along with several more colorful stamps and seals.

Lexa folded it back up and placed it on the sideboard. “Thank you. You are welcome in Polis as the trade envoy of your people, Clarke Griffin.”

“Thank you, Commander.” Clarke bowed her head, mindful of Kane’s coaching.

“And please, for the rest of your visit, stay with me, here at my headquarters, as our guest.”

Clarke was fairly certain that this was not a request she could turn down, so she didn’t. “Thank you. We will be honored.”

Lexa nodded, then moved to the door, calling out for someone, a housekeeper or major domo Clarke assumed. Then Lexa looked back over her shoulder and managed a remarkably indifferent tone as she asked, “Is Roan a member of your party?”

“I have no idea,” Clarke said. “He seems to follow no rules but his own. Though,” and she shivered, “I am glad that he came after us today. Things could have gone quite badly. I owe him my thanks.”

Which sucked, actually, because she’d learned from hard experience that Roan tended to charge very high prices for his services, something he would no doubt be bringing up with her all too soon.
“Yes,” Lexa said, then added with an irritated-looking frown, “Though I could wish he’d left someone alive for my people to question.”

Clarke didn’t trust herself to even start on that topic, so she stuck with an affirming murmur, then offered, “I understand the men who grabbed us hoped to ransom me back to the Mountain.”

“They were a very low class of men.”

Again, Clarke chose to stick with the affirmative murmur.

“How did my brother know you were in the city?”

Clarke was startled. She assumed Lexa had already known this. “We met on the road from TonDC. He decided to join us.”

“I see.” Lexa frowned again.

A woman entered then, and Clarke backed away as Lexa began issuing instructions in Trigedaslang. Once she was finished and the woman departed, Lexa turned back to Clarke, and said, “Come. Duncan and the others have already been shown their lodgings and escorted to the evening meal. Let us go collect my brother, because we should talk, the three of us.”

Clarke nodded and followed Lexa out into the halls. Sensing that this was now a less formal moment, she asked the most pressing question about Roan she could think of. “I understood he was shunned? An outcast from the Trikru?”

“He is. But, as you say, my brother tends to make his own rules.”

“And he gets away with it, why? Because he is your brother?”

“Because he is Roan,” Lexa said with a sigh. “Also, he is very useful. He learns many things, out in the wild, and he shares them with me.”

“So you are, still, his Heda?”

“Hmm. No. I am the Heda of his people, and so he serves me.”

Clarke must have looked as baffled as she felt.

“Come, sit.” Lexa said, gesturing to a bench. “I’ll tell you what I can. Before we meet up with him. What do you know already?”

“He’s your much older half-brother,” Clarke said, and paused for confirmation.

“Yes. By twelve years.”

Clarke nodded, then continued, “And he’s outcast. But he seems to know and be known – at least by reputation – by nearly everyone we meet.”

Lexa said, “Would it surprise you to learn the seers marked him as a reincarnated soul when he was a child?”

Clarke frowned as she worked it out. “Meaning, he was in line to become Heda himself?”

“Yes. Our line, through our mother’s mother, has many hedas in it. Not all souls travel in family bloodlines, but often the strongest do. Our grandmother was the last heda from our family. When
the seers identified her father’s spirit in my brother, no one was surprised. He was,” she paused, “a brilliant child, I understand. Everyone was very pleased.”

“So what happened?”

“You’ve met him. He is brilliant, but he is also different from most Trikru, yes?”

Clarke nodded. She wouldn’t have chosen ‘brilliant’ for him, but different? Yes. That was putting it extremely mildly.

“He is loud. He is unpredictable. He breaks rules and tells you they were stupid rules. And he questions. Questions everything. All the time. It is exhausting.”

Clarke thought she actually looked exhausted by her brother as she said this.

“Worst of all,” Lexa continued, “he values the old knowledge. From the Before Times. By the time he was fifteen he was standing in council, demanding to know why we didn’t go on the offensive against the mountain. Fight back when they stole our people.”

Clarke had often wondered the same thing. Wondered why they thought a wall of skeletons would protect them from Dante Wallace, who killed people even more easily than Lexa herself. Or her brother.

“People tried to understand his anger. His father, a great warrior, had been turned reaper by the mountain, and led a reign of terror that fell on the outer villages and wiped them out when Roan was still a child. But they expected him to outgrow it, to understand that our new ways were our best safety.”

“He didn’t, I assume.”

“No. He did not. He went further. He wanted to use the Before Times knowledge to fight the burning fog and the sleep fog. He wanted, finally, to find the old guns and turn them on the mountain men. Said our fear of them was a myth designed to frighten children and he was no longer a child. He led his warriors out further, ever closer to the mountain. He hunted and killed two mountain soldiers and dragged their rotting bodies home, to prove to us they were merely men. He was the first to ever do that. The result was the mountain men began hunting amongst our neighbors. Who blamed us, and we found ourselves at war with them too.”

“I see.” And she thought she might.

“When the last Heda died, the seers passed over him to choose me, instead.”

“He must have been angry.”

“Yes.”

“I’m going to guess he called them fools and tools of the mountain, only less politely and with more words?”

Lexa looked at her in surprise, then laughed shortly and without much humor. “You do know my brother.”

“Was he cast out then?”

“No. He served me, or rather the Trikru, as a loyal warrior, but he grew ever more intemperate,
more angry, more reckless, until he finally was unwelcome everywhere, and his warriors would no longer follow him. So he left.”

“But he comes to see you, shares what he learns?”

“Yes,” Lexa rose and Clarke followed her, “and to visit his daughter.”
Clarke followed Lexa up a stairwell and down a long, torch-lit hallway to a large room at the end. It was some kind of a lounge, and even had a working fireplace with a small fire, burning against the last spring chill. The room was obviously a more personal space, as there were rugs on the floor and even a set of ancient, pre-cataclysm upholstered sofas and chairs. There were drapes at the windows, framed oil paintings on the walls – landscapes and tall ships tossed at sea, based on Clarke’s first appraisal – and the usual racks and racks of pillar candles.

Someone must spend every morning running around this place replacing all those, Clarke thought with a brief moment of pity for the poor sod, whoever they were.

Roan was sitting on a cushion on the floor, on one side of a low coffee table placed in front of the fire. He was playing a game of chess on what had to be an antique set. His opponent was a slim, serious-faced, young woman and he was watching her patiently as she considered her next move. Clarke was fascinated. She’d had no idea that chess had survived on the ground. From her quick scan, it looked like he was winning handily.

“Roan,” Lexa said, disrupting the quiet scene.

He looked up, then rose gracefully to his feet, turning to offer his hand to his opponent. Without letting go of her hand, he led her over to make introductions.

“Clarke Griffin of the Ark and Mount Weather, may I introduce my daughter, Budeka kom Trigedakru,” he said.

Clarke had leapt to entirely the wrong conclusion about the young woman. Her hazy picture of an infant or toddler daughter, or possibly an adorable five-year old, was blown away in the cool breeze of the adolescent standing in front of her. She half-choked back a surprised laugh as she replied, “Of course. I’m very happy to meet you, Budeka kom Trigedakru.”

And then, because too many surprises in too quick succession had eroded the filter on her tongue, she looked at Roan and said, “You named your daughter after the Celtic Queen?”

“Warrior Queen. Who fought the Romans,” Roan said, with a quick grin of pleasure for her knowing the source of the name.

Clarke turned back to the young woman, girl she now realized. She was tall, taller than Clarke or Lexa, and slim verging on skinny. Her long, wavy hair was very dark brown, like her eyes. But her face was still soft and full. If Clarke had to guess, she’d have put her at thirteen, maybe even an old twelve or a very young fourteen. She was merely tall for her age. Well, tall. She was, in fact, tall. And Roan had become a father as a very young man.

“It is very nice to meet you, Budeka. Your father has saved my life,” Clarke caught his eye again, promising silently to deal with him later about it, “several times now.”

“Really?” Budeka said, turning to grin at Roan, faintly relieved-looking hero worship glowing in her eyes. “You did? You saved the life of the Wanheda kom Skaikru?”

“Yes,” Clarke said firmly. “He did.”

Budeka turned back to Clarke, her pretty face alight with eagerness, “I have heard so much about you from my father. He says you knew my mother, too? Anya?”
By the time Clarke crawled her way back out of that mental rabbit hole, she’d followed Lexa, her brother, and her niece down to a small dining room where they shared an evening meal.

Roan exerted himself to be his charming best, and Lexa helped him along. Budeka was a bright, engaging young person who clearly relished learning more of her mother from someone new. Clarke could spin a great tale about their flight from the mountain, their daring escape, their leap into the falls above the damn, their struggle over which camp they would return to first. She could honestly tell Budeka how impressed she’d been with Anya, how much she came to admire and respect her, and, to her daughter’s delight, even confessed that Anya had thoroughly kicked her ass, more than once.

As she talked she watched Roan watch his daughter as she listened starry-eyed to tales about her mother, his face glowing with the same quiet pride she’d seen on the faces of so many parents on the Ark. She reviewed her weeks with Roan in the autumn, again, and she wondered when she’d ever run out of reasons to reassess him one more time. She realized, now, that he had encouraged her to tell him everything about her encounters with Anya in the smallest detail. She’d obliged him willingly. Anya’s fate was one of the ones she had regretted the most and it had been something of a relief to yammer on at great length about how angry she was over Anya’s death.

She finally asked him, when it seemed to fit best with the stories, “When was the last time you saw Anya?”

He obviously heard her real question. “Midsummer. We met up, every few months, to talk about Budeka. But Anya’s duties to the Commander and my own tasks had kept us apart for a long, long time.” His expression was neutral, yet somehow, in Clarke’s no doubt hopelessly romantic eyes, faintly sad. She ordered herself to get a grip, nodded, and the conversation moved on.

Eventually, the subject of Anya’s many excellent qualities fully exhausted, Roan and Lexa fell happily on Clarke’s questions about the crèches. Budeka grew bored and excused herself.

Once the door closed behind her, the genial, familial atmosphere vanished.

“What are you doing with Clarke?” Lexa asked her brother, her eyes hard and her chin raised in challenge.

“Travelling. Saving her from petty criminals.”

“Yes,” Clarke interrupted what looked like a petty spat brewing. Her experiences with the Blakes having taught her to be always on the alert for such things. “About that,” she looked at Roan, “I owe you my thanks, for my safety and for Macton’s.”

He smirked at her. “More than thanks, Wanheda.”

“Yes. I know. You don’t work for free.”

“I look forward to the negotiation,” he said, his smirk widening into a true grin.

“Hm,” Clarke mock frowned at him, trying not to acknowledge that maybe she was looking forward to it as well. Just a little bit. “I’m sure you do.”

“You will not pressure Clarke against her own choosing in my house, at my table, brother,” Lexa said, slamming her hand down on the tabletop, her expression fierce and her eyes blazing.

Before Clarke could correct her incredibly mistaken assumption, Roan half rose to his feet, leaned forward and shot out his hand, catching Lexa’s wrist and jerking her partway back across the top of
the table, dishes spinning and tumblers and tableware falling to the stone floor with loud clattering. He pinned her arm down, trapping her in a most awkward position. Nearly hissing, he leaned close to her ear and said, “I have never spoken to you of this part of my life because I assumed it was not required.” He paused, angling his head to catch her furious glare with his own. “Tonight, little sister, I promise you that I have never in my life bedded anyone as part of a payment or a deal. It is always freely chosen. And if you ever again suggest that I might, I will rip out your tongue and feed it to you. Do you understand?”

This was the moment that Clarke decided to never, ever have more than one child. Siblings, despite their amplification of population numbers, were clearly nothing but a violent disaster waiting to happen.

Aiming to break up the frozen tableau, Clarke said to Roan, as though nothing at all out of the ordinary were happening, “How did you know I needed help? You came through the door minutes after we ended up in that cellar.”

Lexa flicked her eyes to Clarke, then back at her brother. She nodded to him as regally as she could under the circumstances. “Of course. My apologies.”

Roan visibly shook himself out, dropping Lexa’s wrist and settling back into his chair to look at Clarke as he replied, “I have many people who tell me things, things they think I might want to know.” He couldn’t help but send a sharp glance at his vaguely shamefaced sister, “Debts owed to me or new debts I will pay.” He looked back to Clarke, “I heard that men had been spotted on the roof line, maneuvering you and Macton into a trap. I discovered who the men worked for, sent for Duncan and Beale, and went straight there.”

“Thank you,” Clarke said again.

Roan shrugged. “In truth, it’s only a minor service to you, Wanheda. It was mostly in the interests of the Trikru. The people need to know that you are a guest of the Commander and must be respected as such.”

“Eight men are dead. That’s not minor.” It sounded atrocious, actually, stated baldly like that. Clarke tried not to gag on her own callousness.

“Compared to the wrath that would fall on our heads if your mother and your champion believed harm had come to you with our approval?”

“They wouldn’t!” Clarke exclaimed, but with less confidence than she wished she felt.

“Really,” was all he said, his skepticism strong and clear.

Which led her through the crooked paths of her mind, to ask, “What would you have done, if you thought I was directly responsible for Anya’s death?”

“It would depend. In honorable combat or an accident of war? Nothing. Which is what I did when you told me how she died.”

“But?” Clarke asked, the obvious threat hanging and she wanted it all spelled out, nice and clear.

“But if it was simply murder, or through lies or trickery?” he shrugged. “I would have broken your neck and thrown your body into the deepest mine shaft I could find.”

Clarke nodded, trying to decide if she had genuinely needed to know that or not.
“What is it you are looking for in Polis, Clarke? Really?” Lexa asked.

Before Clarke could finish deciding what to say, Roan answered for her. “Guns. She is looking for guns and ammunition among the Trikru."

“Clarke?” Lexa asked, looking faintly shocked. “Is this true?”

“Yes,” Clarke said, silently damning Roan’s quick mind and quicker tongue, “I am. We already know old gun stores are being uncovered. But without repair and ammunition, they are useless. We expect you will have both, in time, but with the uncertain summer ahead, we wanted to know how close you are to being able to deploy firearms in war.”

“You know about the guns,” Lexa said.

“Some. A few months ago two Trikru boys brought a sackful to the mountain, to see if we could repair them.”

“Did you?”

“Yes. Those few we could. Parts were missing for most, and they had no ammunition, so for now, they are less useful than a good club. Since then we’ve seen others, and heard rumors of more.”

“You know guns are forbidden!” Lexa said disapprovingly.

“We are not bound to uphold your rules for your people in our exchange – unless of course you would care to negotiate for that?” Clarke replied.

Lexa ignored this and looked at Roan. “Are you happy now?”

“Neither happy nor sad. This day was inevitable.”

“What did you find?” Lexa asked Clarke.

Clarke considered various possible replies, but finally settled on the truth. “As far as I’ve seen you don’t have anyone in Polis working to produce ammunition or replacement parts for guns. But you do have craftsmen who have enough of the right tools and could learn the required skills quickly.”

“Are you looking for anything else?”

“Yes. Stockpiles of supplies for making gunpowder.”

“Did you find any?”

“No.”

Lexa turned to Roan. “You know where to find such things.”

“Yes.”

“Are the supplies secured?”

“Some are. Others are in disputed territories.”

“Which ones?”

“There is an old factory site outside of the remains of Richmond. Dupont Chemicals. There’s a lot
there that could still be salvaged. But it lies in the no-man’s land between us and the Flokru. The limestone quarries to the north border Azgeda territory. Only the coal of West Virginia is securely in our lands. At present.”

“Can you take me to these places?” Clarke asked.

Roan looked to Lexa, and after a moment she nodded.

“Yes,” he said to Clarke. “I can.”

“Good.” Clarke nodded, and then said, “Can I ask you another question?”

“Of course,” said Roan.

“Why are you speaking so freely in front of me, in English?”

“Worried we are setting you up?” Roan asked, teasing good humor unexpectedly glinting in his eyes.

“It crossed my mind,” Clarke said drily.

He looked at his sister again, and this time his expression was warm and even, Clarke blinked a little, tender? God, what a mercurial man Roan was.

She also wondered for the first time if Dante Wallace had somehow arranged for Roan’s then practically baby sister to pass him by as Heda. Roan would have taken Cage Wallace apart like a great cat pulling bones out of a fish. Something Dante would have recognized immediately as Roan grew toward adulthood. She also appreciated that, if he was responsible, Dante had left Roan alive and outcast, and not dead, a remembered golden child. Dante’s was a brilliant, if diabolical, mind. One the world was better off without.

“Possibly we’re playing you, a little,” Roan said in answer to her question, “but mostly, our first language is English.”

“What?” She was sure she couldn’t have heard that correctly.

“Some old families, like our mother’s, ours,” he gestured between himself and Lexa, “retain English in the privacy of the home. A matter of pride, not to concede entirely the loss of all civilization.”

Clarke looked to Lexa, sure he had to be punking her.


A new thought occurred to her. “Is Lincoln from a family that spoke English at home?”

“Lincoln? After Abraham Lincoln? You have to ask?” Roan said, laughing a little.

No, she realized. She really didn’t need to ask.
Complaints

“Why hasn’t the Azgeda Ambassador left for her home?”

“Mr. Pike,” Abby smiled tightly, “It’s always a pleasure to see you before the council.”

Though the sitting council, for the moment, was only herself and Marcus. The rest of them had begged off the ‘open door’ community session on the grounds that the questions (or complaints) (mostly complaints) were never for them, about their areas of responsibility or expertise. Cowards. The whole lot of them, she thought with an envious pang.

“No, it isn’t,” Pike said, wearing his own fixed smile. “Why is she still here?”

Abby took a deep breath. “Because she will be staying to deliver her child here.”

Pike considered this silently for a moment or two, then said, “Won’t that make her an outcast?”

“Possibly. Perhaps not, however. She hopes to be able to finesse the situation.” Abby smiled again, aiming to project an air of confidence she totally didn’t feel.

“If she can’t?” he asked, apparently seeing right through her.

“Then we will offer her asylum, just as we did for Mari Stynsdaughter and her family.” Abby met his challenging stare head on, much surer of her stance here.

“Will this anger her queen?”

Abby shrugged. “We don’t know.”

Pike leaned back on his heels and folded his arms across his chest. “We should send her home.”

Abby looked at Marcus, and he nodded. They had known this moment would come sooner or later. Abby had just been hoping for later. “We can’t ask Ambassador Echo to go.”

“Why not?”

“It would be a death sentence.” Abby and Marcus had already talked, at length, with Echo and Bellamy about how much information to give out. Both halves of the younger couple were painfully aware that everything about Echo’s private situation, their situation, had now entered the realm of high-stakes diplomacy. After some persuasion on his part, she had agreed to as full a disclosure as necessary. Abby continued, “Her pregnancy has developed into a high-risk situation. She requires monitored bed-rest now and a scheduled surgical delivery or she will, almost inevitably, die from an otherwise manageable condition.”

“I see.” Pike dropped his eyes to the floor. After a moment he let the tension go, dropped his arms and looked back up at the table, looked at Abby. His voice, when he spoke, was soft and resigned. He might be an uncompromising jerk, but he was in his own way a generous man. He would not send even a stranger to a preventable death, not if there were anything he could do to avert it. “So we wait for events. Once again.”

“Yes,” Abby said, her own shoulders relaxing as she let go the tension of confrontation. “We wait. And pray, if you are a praying sort.”

Pike left and Abby looked at Marcus. “It’s out now.”
“It was out before. Most people can manage to count to nine. I think he just wanted confirmation.”

“Would her people really go to war over this?”

“I don’t think that this alone would push any society to war, but depending on their own factions it could become an excuse for something someone already wants to do.”

“So, maybe, lots of posturing and sword banging but no actual killing?” Abby said, her voice rising hopefully at the end.

“I don’t know, Abby. But my fear, and Echo’s too, I think, is that if it reaches the point that dramatic intervention is necessary, the steps to avoid war may be what fully trigger it. They could demand her death as an atonement and sacrifice. If we continue to offer her shelter, that insult could be the one that triggers everything coming down on our heads.”

“Damned if we do, damned if we don’t. All to prevent an easily preventable death, and one that saves two lives, not just one. You’d think everyone would be happy about that.”

“We are no strangers to seeing childbirth as a community issue, Abby. Or to turning women’s wombs into public property, which then invites all sorts of interventions into how women gestate and give birth.”

“Or even to kill women who give birth against the wishes of the whole. Against the law.” She met his eyes, and knew they were both thinking about Aurora Blake. “I want us to be better than that.”

“I know. I do, too.”
“Clarke?”

Clarke looked up to see Lexa tapping at the frame of her open door.

The guest rooms Lexa had offered them were in a connected suite, so Clarke’s men were content to sleep in the surrounding rooms, between her and the outer door. For the first, and undoubtedly last, time on this trip she’d had two blessed nights alone.

Yesterday, with the expected guide/guard from Lexa, she had been able to visit the chandlery, which was interesting in all sorts of ways, from the ingenious hand-cranked candle extruder to the ways the workers were hand-braiding the wicks. It was also interesting to learn that the branded workers were all prisoners of war, taken in raiding parties across the border into nomad territory.

If Roan hadn’t taken off on another set of his mysterious personal errands, she would have lit into him about how they could stomach using slaves – particularly with many of the slaves marked by their various physical mutations – in Virginia, less than a hundred miles from Gettysburg and less than two hundred miles from the remains of Appomattox Court House. (That Lincoln had retreated to the far edge of Trirku territory to live as a hermit got less surprising by the day, however.) Not because Roan could or would do anything about it, but he at least would entertain the debate. She decided to save it up for the next time he told her he was bored.

“Yes?” Clarke said, “Come on in, I’m just finishing my packing.”

“I wanted to tell you, before you left. I’m sorry you’ve had so many dealings with my brother. He is… difficult.”

Clarke shrugged, “No more difficult than you.”

She didn’t add her follow-up thought. That whatever else Roan did, he had never backed out on a deal with her. Or turned her over to her enemies. At least, the deeply cynical part of her brain added, not yet.

“I see.” Lexa came in until she was standing uncomfortably close. “Do you love him?”

“What?” Clarke stepped back, escaping Lexa’s intensity and laughing in horror. “Your madman of a brother? No. Really I don’t, Lexa. I kinda like him, which makes me almost as crazy as he is, but how could I love him? It would be like trying to love the sun. Get too close and you’d burn up.”

“Anya said the same thing,” Lexa said, her gaze boring into Clarke’s. “Only, she did love him.”

“She must have escaped before she burned,” Clarke said, looking back to her almost completed packing and trying to lift the mood.

“No,” Lexa was shaking her head. “She didn’t. She just survived it, for love of her daughter mostly.”

And Lexa just dragged the mood right back down. Clarke cocked her head to catch Lexa’s eye. “I am not Anya, Lexa. And I am most definitely not in love with Roan.”

“But, you enjoyed your time with him.” She made it a statement, and not a question.
“No,” Clarke made a disgusted face. “Not in the slightest.”

She looked at Lexa and saw hope she didn’t want to see.

Clarke went back to her saddlebags. “Well. He was not a complete and utter shit the last few days.”

A faint smirk hovered at Lexa’s mouth, as she clearly found some bizarre reassurance in this.

“The last few days were good, actually.” Clarke clarified. Ghost hands ran down her body as she remembered that last night. She refused to shiver. “But, the first two weeks were awful.”

“And he did not force you?”

Exasperated beyond diplomacy, Clarke snapped, “Seriously, why are you determined to see your brother as a rapist? Or, for that matter,” and her temper started to rise, “me as a pathetic victim? Aren’t I supposed to be the Wanheda? You really think I’d just be getting ready to head out with him again if I had any concerns about something like that?” Clarke knew her voice was getting louder, but she didn’t seem to be fully in control of it for the moment. “What will it take to convince you that I’m not helpless or unable to take care of myself? That I’m more than capable of fighting back if I have to? How many more people do I have to kill to prove myself? How many times are you planning to say goodbye to me thinking I’m about to die before you get it through your thick head I’m really fucking hard to kill?”

After a tense silence, broken only for Clarke by the sound of her heart hammering away, Lexa broke their locked gazes.

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” Lexa looked down at her hands. They were twisted together in tension and she forced them apart and down to her sides, then raised her face. “But I have never loved anyone he was with before. Anyone he might take from me before I even …” she trailed off and turned away. Eventually she looked back at Clarke and confessed, “I’m not handling it well.”

Intentionally or not, Lexa had found the one approach that punctured Clarke’s burst of anger. Feeling utterly deflated, Clarke breathed, “Lexa… I still don’t know what to say.”

Or, rather, all the things she could think of to say were hurtful or needlessly provocative or both. I don’t love you. I don’t even really know you. I didn’t ask for you to love me. How can you love me, you hardly know me. I think you might be in love with who you imagine me to be, Lexa, and not who I really am. I can’t replace Costia or be your second and I don’t want to try.

So she said nothing at all.

“I’m sending you off with him this morning,” Lexa said.

“I have three other men, sworn to me or the Ark, all of whom would kill him for me if I asked.”

“They could try.”

“That’s what he said.” Their mutual confidence in his skills was really a little much, Clarke thought, commanding her memory of him killing three men in front of her eyes in fewer minutes, and a fourth probably ten minutes after that, to go take a hike.

“He is … Roan.”

“If you hate him so much, why haven’t you had him killed?” Clarke said. Lexa certainly seemed at ease with offing anyone else who worried her. Why not her troublesome brother?
“Hate him?” Lexa shook her head, honest surprise on her face. “Clarke, I love him. When I was a child, he was my hero. I couldn’t wait to grow up and earn his praise as a warrior under his command. Even now his approval pleases me more than it ought …” she finally broke off and wandered away to the other side of the room, “I also, sometimes, wish he were less than he is.”

“I can understand that.”

“He makes me a better leader. I dread the day he does get himself killed.”

“How does he make you better?” Clarke asked, trying and failing to imagine how that might be possible.

“Where do you think the idea of the coalition came from? Or who made the first contacts among the Clans to set in motion the steps to make it possible?”

Clarke hadn’t stopped to consider this before, but this interpretation of events made a perfect kind of sense.

“I can be over-cautious. He can be reckless. Together we are more than we would be alone.”

Clarke nodded, but didn’t say anything more. Because what she was thinking was that it wasn’t Roan who jeopardized the entire coalition in order to retain her own position of leadership rather than share in a hard-won victory. It wasn’t Roan who accepted a deal with Dante Wallace.

“Please be careful. Please come back safely,” Lexa said.

“Lexa,” Clarke paused and considered her words carefully, trying to thread the needles of truth and kindness in one go. “I will be careful and I will be safe. And I’m not coming back to Polis afterwards. I’m going straight back to Mt. Weather to make my reports.”
“Is the coast clear?” Octavia asked in a loud whisper, peaking around the doorframe to Echo’s quarters.

“Yes,” Echo called. She was propped up on a sofa lounger, her feet resting high on a stack of pillows. It made her belly look very round, like she’d swallowed an old-fashioned beach ball. “Totally clear.”

“I got it!” Octavia crowed, slipping in the door and brandishing her basket in triumph. “Four mammoth pieces of lemon cake with butter cream icing, two strawberry tarts, and two pieces of key lime pie.”

“You are my hero.” Echo beamed at her, her smile transforming as it always did her faintly forbidding countenance into a warm and welcoming one.

Octavia grinned back. “I do my best.”

“I swear on my mother’s grave, Octavia, if he brings me another ‘heart healthy’ meal I’m going to break the basket over his head.”

“He fusses because he cares, but in his defense, I think the dieticians are following Dr. Griffin’s orders, and not Bell’s.”

“Hmmph,” Echo said, already investigating the contents of the basket.

“Let’s get to work. If we’re going to be able to eat all this before he gets back, it will take some effort.” Octavia said. “I even brought tea.”

“Like, a tea party?”

“Did you have those, when you were a little girl?” Octavia was shocked. Somehow she imagined that life on the ground had precluded such frivolous pastimes.

“Yes. With my sisters. Pretend tea, of course.” Echo smiled briefly in memory. Then she looked quizzically at Octavia. “Did you think we played no games as children?”

“No, I knew you played games!” Octavia said, though if you’d asked her point blank ten minutes ago she’d have scoffed at the idea. “But I figured they’d be those training games – throwing sticks through rolling hoops, stuff like that.”

“Those, too,” Echo nodded. “But we are not always grim, and my grandmother had a children’s tea set, saved from the Before Times by her mother. My oldest surviving sister has it now. She’ll pass it on to her daughter. Who is four years old and served excellent pretend tea when I visited last.”

Octavia smiled at the image, and her own memories. “Bell would come to my tea parties. Also pretend tea.” And pretend tea sets, but there was no reason to get into all that.

Octavia and Echo ate cake, and tarts, and pie, and shared more stories about their very different girlhoods.

Not the bad ones, or the dark ones. Octavia was tired of dwelling on hers, and Echo kept her hurts equally private. Octavia knew, from their brief time in the Azgeda capital, that both of Echo’s
parents had passed away. She’d learned later that one sister had already died in childbirth, as had the first wife of one of Echo’s brothers. Another nephew, born alive but with an exposed spine, had been left to the winter elements.

Today they shared the good stories, the times they loved, games and jokes with their siblings, memories of their mothers’ caresses, things that made them laugh, and the dreams they’d dreamed.

Octavia had just wanted a life outside of a damn box in the floor, a life she had no idea how her mother would ever have offered her. In the end, she and Bellamy had theorized that Aurora planned to turn herself in after Octavia’s eighteenth birthday, try to make an even exchange. Her life for Octavia’s.

“Bellamy says it was a shitty plan. The rules were clear, both mother and second, unauthorized child were supposed to be floated. Otherwise the gamble would be too appealing. More people would try it. It would only work for our mom if the Chancellor at the time offered mercy, and Chancellor’s terms could be so steep that you’d end up wishing for floating.”

Echo put her hands on her belly, and said gently, “I can understand, now, just a little, I think. Motherhood – it can make you greedy. I feel it already and I’ve barely had my first taste.”

“Ack,” Octavia exclaimed. “I didn’t mean to talk about her. What did you dream of doing?”

Echo had wanted to ride in the great cross-country races, seek victory on the polo fields, but her injury from skirmishes with the Sankru and later war with the Trikru had ended those dreams. The races and the games hadn’t been held since the war with the Trikru began.

“And so, we should have more cake!” said Octavia. “This is supposed to be a tea party, not a boring old politics lesson. We can have those any time.”

“Ohay,” Echo smiled at her. “More cake.”

Bellamy arrived while they were laughing heartily at Echo’s description of the time she and her sisters had tried to hide an unauthorized day trip that ended in a drenching thunderstorm from their father.

They both looked up guiltily, but Bellamy just came around sit beside Echo and lean in to kiss her. Pretty thoroughly, actually, for a hello babe, end of day kiss. Pregnancy hadn’t slowed down their PDA in the slightest. Though, Octavia wondered in passing, was it really PDA if it was in your own quarters on your own sofa, just because your kid sister was in the room?

“Lemon cake,” he said, looking at Echo, shaking his head in mock scolding. He left his arm draped around Echo’s shoulders as he said to Octavia with a very winning smile, “Is there any left for me?”

Lincoln showed up soon after, Wes in his shadow and jugs of beer under their arms. Turned out you got used the stuff pretty quick, they’d learned. Hard on their heels came Raven and Wick. She was balancing three large, covered platters on her lap as Wick pushed her wheelchair. (An accommodation she’d grudgingly accepted in the name of efficiency. Between her cane or her crutch, she couldn’t carry very much equipment when she was walking. Then she’d learned to race down the central ramp, and now there was a line up of kids who wanted to race her in a discarded wheel chair Wick had repaired for the purpose.)

“We bring pizza pie,” Wick said, with a proud grin. “A most excellent food I am so happy to announce the cooks have revived for our dining pleasure.”
Wick had also brought a set of speakers and a music player, stashed in the bag on the back, the one that usually held their tool kits.

The atmosphere in the room began to feel more and more like a party. Nathan and Monroe appeared, carrying bread and cheese and more cake, and few minutes after that Kavan and Mari knocked on the door, all three children in tow.

Mari, not pregnant, was still a small round little person, but with an outsize personality, an incredibly optimistic view of the world, and a generous heart, and it didn’t surprise anyone that her husband had dragged her to the mountain to save her life. She was also the one who handled all the details of their final move to join the Skaikru, including choosing her own patronymic built from Kavan’s mother’s name.

The pizza was good, and, they discovered, went very well with the beer. Easy conversations flowed around the room, mostly focused determinedly on summer plans that did not include any war making.

Octavia drifted over to where Bellamy had taken up a spot by the wall, watching the party.

“It’s good of you to do this,” Octavia said, nodding at Echo. She was sitting up and holding one of Mari’s twin boys and laughing at something Raven was saying.

“She’s stuck here in quarters most of the day. I remember how much you hated that.”

Octavia nodded, and they both fell silent. Octavia because she really didn’t like to think about her life on the Ark, Bellamy because he was looking broody about something. She knew it couldn’t be Echo, not right this minute. Echo was in great shape ... “Have you heard from Clarke?” she asked.

“No.”

“It’s only been a few weeks.”

“Three and a half. It’s been three and half weeks. Long enough to go to Polis, stay for a week, and return.” He sounded supremely irritated, which for Bellamy, she knew, translated as really worried.

“Maybe she’s following up on something. You said Kane sent her to investigate. It’s not just a shopping trip.”

Bellamy nodded, and then he looked at Octavia and grinned ruefully. “Maybe she’s just happy to be out of the mountain for a while. Things are kind of, weird right now. Out of sync.”

Octavia knew he meant weird between the two of them, as much as he meant weird in general. “She’ll come home.”

His face clouded as he nodded. “If she can.”
Roan hurled the short burnt remnant of a board at the last wall still standing. “Nomanjoka!”

This translated, more or less directly, as ‘motherfucker.’

The board burst through the charred paper-thin metal siding and landed with a quiet rustling in the undergrowth beyond, startling a few birds.

Clarke totally understood his frustration.

The remains of the huge DuPont Chemical plant spread out around them for kilometers in all directions. Roan had identified it years ago as a source for at least some of the ingredients for the propellants required in the ammunition for repeating-fire weapons. He’d agreed to show it to her, with his sister’s approval.

Clarke was sure their reasons for this were complex, but part of it was surely to prove they weren’t making any yet. Another part was to illustrate that they could, in time, if they wanted too. Or, if the mountain got back in the powder manufacturing game – and maybe that would finally give Jasper some interest in life again – the Trikru would score trade advantages or at least finder’s fees – payable in new ammunition. Of course, that only worked if the Trikru actually had something to offer.

Nearly all of the old factory buildings were in a state of advanced collapse and most were nothing but mounds of rubble with small trees growing on top of them. But there were a few stocked warehouses that were still standing, and some underground storage had lasted as well.

Or they had been eighteen months ago, when Roan last visited.

They were three days out from Polis. At first, the road heading south had been relatively well travelled, especially between Polis and TonDC. South of TonDC it had been more of a trail than a road, but still easy enough to follow. Today it had faded to a track and finally to nothing at all.

Roan explained this wasn’t the direct route to any Trikru or Flokru villages. In fact there really wasn’t much out this way at all as the ground rapidly grew too swampy and rugged to support much beyond seasonal hunting.

Twilight was falling early under a cloud-covered sky but even so, standing here now, it was clear to all of them that a major fire had ripped through the shattered remains of the factory. Based on the skeletons of last summer’s weeds and the odd surviving tree dotted about, it was also pretty clear that the fire had happened more than a year ago.

Roan returned to his horse, pulled off his hunting bow and quiver and said he’d be back with supper in a while, then headed off into the brush. A clumsier man would have stomped, but however volatile Roan could be, he always moved quietly in the woods.

“Well, we’d better set up camp,” Clarke said to the other three men. “And I don’t think we, or the horses, should drink any of the water around here, unless we can get upstream from the factory site.”
The morning found them back at the edge of the remains of the warehouse Roan had wanted to show her. Clarke insisted that they all wear gloves and improvised face masks if they were going to be stirring up ash and the other remains of God knows what.

“Unless someone carted off the stuff before setting fire to the warehouses, maybe emptied it into other containers, and put the containers back to fool us?” Clarke said, thinking aloud.

Roan sent her a nasty side-eye. “Right. Very likely. Because we are such ignorant savages that we’d naturally think pouring unknown chemical compounds into ancient plastic tubs or new clay pots is a really good idea.”

“Hey! I didn’t say that!” And she hadn’t. Said it. But, however unconsciously, she knew she’d been thinking exactly that. Roan, dressed in leathers, with tattoos running up his arms to his neck and down the length of his body, kill scars on his shoulders, a machete strapped on his back and a knife at his hip, was hardly the image of a modern industrialist. But looks could be deceiving. She KNEW that, she scolded herself. She took advantage of this all the time, used the knowledge that the people of the clans still saw her as a soft, untested naïf who couldn’t fight her way out of a paper sack to take them by surprise.

Roan glared at her and snapped, “The containers were all clearly labeled with the skull and crossbones, flammable pictograms and even corrosive and health hazard symbols. For those completely imaginary warriors who can’t read. And all to fool – who exactly?”

“You!”

“I’m not important or infamous enough to fool, Wanheda.”

It was really amazing, Clarke thought, that Roan managed to spin exactly the same sneering tone into ‘Wanheda’ that Bellamy used to work into the way he said ‘Princess.’

They did poke around just enough to decide that the racks of stored compounds had burned where they stood and that the fire had natural causes. The entrances Roan knew about that led to the underground storage facilities were all blocked by charred debris. Clarke thought the fire hadn’t gone much beyond the blockage, but without some proper equipment to move it they weren’t going to find out easily.

Clarke was also convinced the site had to be seriously contaminated, so they pulled out once they were sure nothing could be salvaged without a major effort. They didn’t get far, only five or six miles, but it was still so nice to be back in healthy-looking forest that everyone’s mood improved. Even Roan’s.

The next leg of their trip would take them three hundred miles almost due west to the mining region in what had been the very southwestern tip of Virginia – and was now the southwestern tip of territory held by an offshoot of the Trikru – according to the old maps Roan had with him. Then it would be another almost four hundred miles northeast to the limestone quarries in Pennsylvania after that. These were sources for the chemicals necessary for both new ammunition and for the manufacture of old-school ‘black’ gunpowder. Black powder couldn’t be used for repeating fire cartridges, but it would work for shotguns, revolvers and artillery shells, as well as bombs, mines and general-purpose explosives.

They aimed to follow old roadbeds as much as possible and Roan hoped they could make forty or more miles a day on horseback. But there were enough downed trees and washouts, combined with mud and a week’s worth spring rains, that their travel times dropped considerably. The slow speed, the mud and the wet made everyone grumpy, and for the first time since she’d known him, Roan
retreated to grounder silence. As far as Clarke could tell, the four men communicated with each other mostly by gesture, or with terse, one-syllable words.

After a day or so, she found it … oddly soothing. No one asked her how she was doing, eyebrows raised significantly. No one was the slightest bit interested in her fretting about the past or the future. They certainly didn’t give a flying fuck about her feelings about Bellamy and Echo, they wouldn’t ask her about Commander Lexa if their lives depended on it, and they just shrugged, communicating only a sort of fatalistic resignation when she asked them if war would come this summer.

After a little over a week of this, Clarke was counting out the days over her morning tea and slowly coming to terms with the fact that there was no freaking way she was going to make it back to Mt. Weather by the first of May. Kane and her mother would be worried. Bellamy would be flat out pissed. And there was nothing she could do about it and no way to get any report to them sooner.

She opened her mouth to start complaining about this to Beale. Not because he would be any more interested than anyone else, he was just the only one near by. The rest had headed off into the trees to pursue personal business a while ago. But before she could say anything, Beale touched her shoulder. She looked up and saw him put his finger to his lips, then he cast his eyes around the campsite. “Didn’t your grandmother tell you to cover your head against the morning chill?” he said, looking at her scarf, then at her eyes.

“I never met my grandmother,” Clarke replied, her heart suddenly hammering hard, but she set down her mug and pulled her grey scarf from around her neck, shaking it out and preparing to wrap it around her head. Over her telltale hair. Her fingers were only trembling a little.

“She would have told you,” Beale said. Then he hitched his rifle up on his shoulder and nodded into the woods. “I’ll be back in a few minutes,” he said, “Then you can go.”

Beale vanished into the scrub alongside the old roadbed they were camping on and Clarke realized that she was now alone next to the fire. The horses were hobbled nearby, still grazing in the spring weeds growing along the cracked edges of the asphalt. The hairs on her arms and the back of her neck were beginning to stand up and the air practically vibrated with anticipation.

She finished wrapping her scarf around her head, securely fastening the ends, then she stood up, ostensibly to stir the fire, but mostly to get up off her ass and get her hands around a stout branch.

When the arrow buried itself in front of her feet it was almost a relief. As she dove for the ground behind a pile of saddles and gear, four rifle shots rang out in quick succession and there was at least one scream, cut short.

Then a stranger erupted from the brush, headed straight for Clarke, his naked blade raised in his hand, a war cry bursting from his open mouth. He’d taken no more than three or four strides when he jerked back and then crashed forward, a crossbow bolt protruding from his spine. Roan followed him out, came to a stand over his prone body and fired another bolt directly into the middle of his neck. Clarke was pretty sure it buried itself in the stranger’s brainstem.

Roan jerked his head at Clarke, indicating he wanted her behind him even as he knocked another bolt. She moved quickly, trying to look everywhere at once.

Within ten minutes or so the rest of her men had returned to their campsite.

Roan looked at the others. “Did we get them all?”
“Five bodies,” Macton replied with a curt nod.

“Good. Let’s move out.”

“Wait,” said Clarke. “How do you know five is all there were?”

“They started tracking us yesterday,” Roan said.

“What?! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wanted to know if you’d spot them. Since you didn’t – which is something we should work on – and they were most interested in you…” he shrugged and trailed off.

“You let me be the goat,” Clarke finished the thought, feeling a blush creeping up her neck. She also wondered what else she hadn’t been noticing.

“Goat?” Roan asked.

“The trained pet goat. Because it isn’t in danger it calms the other animals by leading the way into the slaughterhouse.”

Roan laughed. “I never heard that before. Yes, you were the goat, leading them to the slaughter.” He chuckled again, his eyes lighting up as he looked at her. “Goat. I like that.”

“You’re going to call me Goat now, aren’t you.”

“Oh, yes,” he said, nodding vigorously. “Unless you prefer Wanheda?” and he offered her a wicked smile.

“You know I don’t.” She frowned, something in what he said was … “Wait. You said they were interested in me? Who were they? What did they want?”

“Banished men. Desperate men. You’re worth a great deal to many different people. Your mother the Skaikru Heda would pay well to get you back, for example.”

“Oh,” she said, suddenly feeling a bit hollow inside. She’d forgotten that she could be a target even in the wilderness, which much like the forest near the drop ship, only looked empty to her untrained eyes. And she didn’t even want to know who other than her mother would pay for her. But she was going to have to ask one of these days. The men with her had all known. They’d come with her anyway and without a word of complaint or caution, risking their own lives just by being with her. After a moment, she said to all of them, “I’m sorry. Thank you for undertaking the journey anyway.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry about the unexpected delay in posting. I don't think it will happen again.
Bellamy reacted before he thought. When he saw the hands of the new Azgeda representative and members of his retinue reach for the hilts of their blades, when he heard that memorable hiss of steel, he threw himself between Echo and the rest of the room.

In the next few seconds he heard the sounds of rifles shifting into position, safeties clicking off, and suddenly the whole room was in a standoff.

*How the hell did we get here so fast?*

“How!?” cried Kane, and then using his hands to direct his own guard, “Rifles down.”

The guards present lowered the muzzles of their guns, eased back into a standing position, but didn’t move their hands and didn’t drop their guns.

Kane looked to the Azgeda, “Hands away from your weapons.”

After another very tense, very long second, the new Azgeda representative nodded his head and he and his men also eased their weapons back into their various sheaths and straps and raised their empty hands.

“Good,” Kane said. “Very good. Now, everyone who was sitting, please resume your seats.” He looked directly at Bellamy. “Including you, Major.”

Slowly, everyone did as Kane asked and there was a quiet shuffling, scraping and shifting as they gradually settled back into their chairs at the big table set up in the center of the meetinghouse.

Four days earlier the party of a half-dozen Azgeda warriors had arrived at Mt. Weather. Their news was grim, at least as far as the Arkers were concerned. Echo had been recalled home. She was to take up a post directly advising her aunt, Queen Nia.

Yeflin, the new Azgeda representative, had offered up his credentials with a flourish as soon as he figured out which member of the welcoming party on the steps of the meetinghouse was Abby Griffin.

Bellamy had disliked Yeflin from the moment he laid eyes on him. He was a stout man in late middle age, sporting the forked, braided beard worn by most of the Azgeda men he’d met so far. (Bellamy had no idea why a group of people would choose, on purpose, to take the dwarves of Middle Earth as their fashion inspiration.) Yeflin also wore a big, wide belt that did nothing to hide, and much to advertise, his well-fed belly. He might have seemed jolly, except that even when he smiled his deep-set eyes remained cold. His complex forehead tattoo wrapped around his temples and onto his cheeks, like an old Venetian half-mask. Instead of an abstract design, he’d chosen a finely detailed rendering of a wolf bringing down a deer.

As soon as Yeflin finished presenting himself to Chancellor Griffin and the other two members of the council who had joined her, he looked around for Echo. His expression was almost comically surprised once he laid eyes on her, and then for the first and last time he grinned in oily satisfaction. He managed to look positively avuncular as he strode over to Echo, beaming with pride and putting his big, meaty hands on her belly with such a satisfied smirk of ownership that Bellamy had wanted nothing more than to punch him in the face. Repeatedly.

He still did. The fact that Yeflin probably outweighed him by a good fifty kilos at least, only half
of it in his gut, didn’t bother Bellamy at all.

At that first meeting, Echo had recoiled as soon as Yeflin touched her. Then she overturned his happy assumption that she would be immediately riding for home now that someone else had come to take up her post by telling him she had no plans to leave any time soon.

Which is when it became clear that Yeflin was not good at estimating the progress of a pregnancy on the fly. He said surely her partner would be waiting her arrival in the capital city. Echo had thrown her shoulders back and, clearly enough to be heard by everyone present, named Bellamy as her child’s father. Everyone already on the mountain had assumed this, of course, but this was the first time Echo had made a clear, definitive statement about it. It apparently shocked the hell out of the Azgeda.

A kind of slow moving pandemonium had broken out at that point. Only Echo announcing that standing so long had tired her and that she would speak to Yeflin in the morning ended it. Then she had taken Bellamy’s arm and headed inside the fortress. Her fingers had been so tight he was half surprised there were no bruises when he checked much later that night. Yeflin had been shocked, then furiously angry, to discover that he couldn’t follow her past the front gate.

Their morning meeting had gone no better. Both Echo and Yeflin had stormed out of the office set aside for them after less than an hour. Echo went right to the Chancellor and formally requested asylum. She told Bellamy later that Yeflin had threatened to have her dragged from the fortress and sent home like a disobedient child, and she couldn’t think of any other way to make sure he wouldn’t be able do that.

Echo had looked utterly wrecked when she told him this. He knew that turning her back on her people, on her aunt, on the most important rank she’d ever earned, loosing her family, all of it was something she’d dreaded. He’d offered her any comfort she wanted, only to face her asking to be alone. He slept in his own quarters for the first time in four months that night.

Yeflin had also gone to see the Chancellor, to demand that they turn Echo over to the Azgeda. Abby Griffin had explained that once a request for asylum was granted, and it had been, then Echo would leave the mountain of her own free will or not at all. Yeflin had declared that he couldn’t accept that. Griffin had said she was very sorry, but it was done.

Another day was spent with seconds running back and forth to get everyone to agree to this meeting today. The one that had nearly erupted into violence less than fifteen minutes after it began.

Once everyone was back in their chairs, and their chairs pulled up to the table – after Kane’s reproving stare fell on each person in turn – he said, “I apologize for our outburst, Yeflin Kom Azgeda. This is a difficult time for all of us.”

Yeflin nodded his head briefly, the returned to his subject. “Echo Kom Azgeda must return to her aunt’s house as ordered. For you to shelter her in her defiance makes you as guilty as she of offering insult to our queen.”

“We do not intend insult, Yeflin, by honoring Echo’s request for asylum.” This was the moment that brought Yeflin to his feet before, protesting (again) (ad nausea) that Ark had no authority to grant asylum to any member of the clans that the clans were bound to recognize, and that Echo required no asylum from her family in any case. Thus time around, Kane’s glare held Yeflin in his chair. Kane nodded and continued, “So we propose a marriage alliance between Echo Kom Azgeda and Major Bellamy Blake, of the Ark. It would give us great pleasure to offer the Azgeda and Queen Nia gifts in exchange for Echo’s hand.”
Bellamy hated this idea. Not because he objected to marrying Echo: he didn’t object at all. He cared for her, she cared for him, the sex was great, they both wanted to be present for their son. He objected because it seemed too much like purchasing her. Echo, Lincoln and Mari Stynasdaughter all convinced him that a clan alliance through marriage was not at all like purchasing a spouse. Offering gifts was merely a way to mark the new relationship. Po-ta-toe, Po-tah-toe as far as Bellamy was concerned, but he’d agreed they should try.

Yeflin started to rise again, the man really liked trying to alpha-dog any situation he found himself in, and Kane coughed pointedly. Yeflin settled back into his chair, declaring, “There can be no marriage. We do not formalize unions outside the recognized Clans. Unless…” Yeflin paused dramatically.

According to Echo, Yeflin had led the faction that opposed joining Lexa’s Coalition. A stance he loudly claimed was justified after Lexa’s abandonment of the Coalition’s position at Mt. Weather before it fell, sacrificing the fortress and all it’s bounty to the Ark. He had also strongly disapproved of any formal recognition of the Ark, warning that the Arkers would prove just as dangerous and full of trickery as the Mountain Men.

When Echo had shared all this with the Chancellor after that first meeting, Abby had declared – in a spirit of completely unwarranted optimism in Bellamy’s opinion – that this was an opportunity to win Yeflin over. Kane had suggested that perhaps Nia was sending him to get him out of her way, isolating him from the court at home.

Echo had smiled politely, but ever blunt, said she thought Yeflin had probably sought the post with the intention of bringing about an end to their tentative relationship at the very least, or triggering outright hostilities if he could.

Echo’s pregnancy offered him every opportunity for both.

“You would offer up one half of the bounty of Mt. Weather,” Yeflin concluded, everything about his expression and tone working to make this sound like an entirely reasonable proposal.

Abby Griffin managed an incredibly good impression of a genuine laugh. “Representative Yeflin,” she said with a shake of her head and twinkle in her eye, “you know as well as I that no one would value a marriage alliance, even one that has already proven so fruitful, so highly. I am sure we can find some more equitable arrangement. Perhaps a shipment of antibiotic ointments?”

Yeflin’s smile barely moved his luxuriant mustache. “One shipment? Echo is sister-daughter to our Queen. That would be an insult.”

Abby settled in, Kane at her shoulder, and the bargaining began in earnest.

Bellamy looked to his right, trying to gauge Echo’s reaction to all this. She was pale, and he thought he saw a faint sheen of sweat along her forehead. Under the guise of taking her hand in a loving manner, which earned him a glare and an attempt to jerk free but he held on, he felt for her pulse. Which was hammering hard and not, he thought, entirely evenly. He leaned close, “How long?”

She answered through barely moving lips, her gaze still focused on Yeflin. “Since they reached for their weapons. I can’t get it to slow down.”

“I’m going to get you some water, and if you’re not substantially better in five minutes, I’m taking you out of here. They can do this without us.”
His concern advanced two notches to full-on worry when she just nodded in agreement.

He stood, but kept his shoulders down and head bowed, waving Kane off, and made his way to the sideboard. Pouring a glass water and carrying it back, along with a small plate with some bread and cheese, he decided he would have to thank Octavia again for her advice. More like instructions. Or actually more like an order. She’d shown up at his quarters last night and told him to get his ass back to Echo’s rooms and sleep on the couch if he had too, but he wasn’t going to leave her alone. He went. He didn’t sleep on the couch.

Five minutes later he was escorting Echo out. She improved noticeably in the fresh air, and if she leaned heavily on him as they walked over to check in on the foals at the stable, neither of them remarked on it.
From Clarke's vantage point on the edge of the old mountain road, the view of the eastern lands below was breathtaking.

She was watching the day break over the world, the grey morning mist slowly evaporating as the sun lit the early spring leaves a vivid yellow green. Sipping her tea, she felt truly grateful that she had been lucky enough to be able to reach the ground, and then survive long enough to see this.

They were more than halfway through the leg of their journey between the coalmines of southwestern Virginia and the limestone quarries in southern Pennsylvania. The mines had been just as Roan described. They could be reopened with relatively little effort, even to Clarke’s untutored eye, assuming miners of course. Though Raven would probably have some acidic things to say about it if they ever got her down there.

The trip since then had been gorgeous. The high road – an old inter-state highway – was wide and clear, far enough up that the cold kept the undergrowth down, and they were making good time in a long succession of clear, sunny days.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Roan had been standing beside her for quite a while, but he hadn’t felt the need to talk either. “If we had the time, this is a good spot to watch the entire day pass over the world.”

She turned to him in surprise. “Have you done that? From here?”

“Yes,” he smiled at the view. “I have. Several times over the years. From here, or a handful of other spots. It’s a good way to think. Or, sometimes,” he shrugged, “not think.”

Clarke could understand the sensation. She’d spent a month drawing plant studies to avoid thinking, and a year before that in solitary confinement, drawing pictures of an imagined earthly home.

After another, shorter period of contemplating the world, she finally asked, “Who, besides my mother, would pay for me?”

Roan was quiet for a while, contemplating his answer. At last he said, “In the autumn there was much talk that anyone who could bring you in to Mt. Weather, or Polis, or even the Azgeda capital, would earn a significant bounty. Because the amounts of the reward varied, it’s also possible that someone might choose to hold you for the highest bidder. In turn, making you a tempting target for others hoping for the same reward.”

“No,” she said.

“Yes. But not necessarily. The men who tried to abduct you in Polis weren’t – yet – banished men.”

And now, being dead, they never would be. Ghost fingers crawled up her spine as she finally let herself acknowledge that thirteen men had died just within the last month, all because she had wanted to see the world outside of Ark territory. Wanheda indeed.

“So why are some killed, but others – like you – only banished?” she asked.

Roan gave her a dirty look.
“Okay, so, no one is exactly like you, but...”

“No. Not like me. I left Polis because I could no longer function as a war leader. There was no place for me because we weren’t going to war against our true enemy. I was shunned for leaving. Those men were kicked out for crimes.”

“Are the banished always men?”

“In theory, no. But,” Roan paused, his forehead creased in thought, “I can’t think of a single woman banished for theft or certain types of disobedience or cowardice, which are the only crimes that wouldn’t carry a death sentence.” He looked to the other men, still sitting by the fire, “Can any of you think of a woman banished for theft or running from battle?”

They all shook their heads after a moment or two, indicating that they couldn’t recall any either. Roan looked back at Clarke. “Women are banished with their mutant offspring, of course, if they insist on attempting to raise them. But that’s a different thing.”

“Why do you do that? Force them out?”

“Because such children and the care they require are too much of a drain on the community.” He must have seen her objection looming. “Most such children die, Clarke,” he said, his expression gentle and full of regret. But his tone was implacable. “Slowly and in great pain. The visible mutations tend to come with other body weaknesses. Heart problems. Lung problems. Cancers. Infections and then gangrene in twisted limbs. Because the child’s care is so consuming, parents can’t even fend for themselves, so that burden falls on someone else. If the children do survive, they can never do their full share either. Someone else must do extra work to support them. And there is always the concern that if they survive long enough to have children of their own, the genetic weakness will stay in the clan.”

“It’s still cruel!”

“Our world has been cruel. Especially for these last generations. We needed to focus on every healthy child. Maybe now that the mountain men are gone...” he trailed off.

“So if you need every healthy child, why do you let women die in childbirth by making them labor alone, when it’s easily preventable with a little help?”

Roan frowned. “That’s harder to explain, because I don’t fully understand it myself. There used to be midwives. When we were children.” He nodded at Duncan, “Indra’s mother was a midwife.”

“No way!”

“Yes,” Duncan nodded. “It’s true. But her daughters and granddaughters all became warriors and none picked up the mantle from her.”

“But that still doesn’t mean women should labor alone!”

“No. And they didn’t, not all the time.” Roan suddenly grinned at her. “I was with Anya when Budeka was born. So was my mother. We weren’t breaking any rules.”

“Because no one would question your mother,” Duncan said. “There were those who thought it shameful that a warrior of Anya’s caliber was so weak in her trial of labor.”

Roan shot a nasty glare at Duncan. “Others meaning, you and Indra.”
“We were hardly alone,” Duncan replied. His expression didn’t change, but somehow the challenge hung in the air anyway.

Clarke was fascinated by this very first tiny hint about the source of the old bitterness between Duncan and Roan. They had worked together without friction, even an easy familiarity she thought, since Roan had joined them. But they did not speak to each other unless it was vital.

This was not vital. This was an old fight finally leaking to the surface.

“Some men still stay, for their children and their children’s mother,” Beale offered, clearly attempting a little peace making. “They are breaking the rules now but they do it. And sometimes the people will look the other way.”

Macton actually added, “Sisters or mothers sometimes stay as well. But, no one talks of it, unless, for spite, they want to cause harm.”

“So who made the rule? Who enforces the rule?” Clarke asked, her curiosity about whatever lay between Roan and Duncan completely offset by the way Beale and Macton were exerting themselves to head it off. Whatever it was, it was bad. Of course, Roan had once asked her to murder Duncan, so there was that too.

Duncan looked away. Cultural explanation was clearly Roan’s job.

“Killing or exiling mutants goes back to the time right after the Cataclysm,” Roan said. “Everything else has grown from that. The Seers enforce rules such as these. Also Healers. Village headwomen. Hedas. In the name of protecting the people from weakness.”

“But if there were midwives, what happened to them?”

Roan frowned. “I don’t think anything happened to them, exactly?”

He looked at Duncan, who just lifted one shoulder. Clarke had no idea what that was supposed to signify other than he wasn’t going to use his words.

Roan actually rolled his eyes before he continued, “I think they just didn’t pass on their knowledge or their skills. We needed warriors to hold out against the growing culling of the reapers. Everyone capable of holding a blade or a spear went into the line. We are short healers as well now. And so it became a badge of honor for women to labor alone. And then… a rule.”

Clarke nodded. She thought she could finally see a glimmer of a pattern. How pressure from the reapers combined with old fears – real and imagined – about the mutants, the steady loss of healers and midwives, and a harsh culture focused on strength, could slip into a counterproductive legalism regarding birth.

But it still sucked mightily and couldn’t change fast enough to keep Echo and her baby safe from retaliation for the terrible (non)crime of simply needing a little extra assistance.
“Chancellor?” Andrea Cho tapped on the doorframe to Abby’s office. “Indra and her party are arriving on the plateau.”

“Thanks, Andrea,” Abby said, closing out her screen and rising to her feet. “Let’s go find out what brings the chief of TonDC to see us.”

Perimeter beacons and then the border guards had been tracking Indra and her party since yesterday. They had camped just outside the boundary last night and then ridden hard to be there by midday.

Abby and Kane and the rest of the council, pretty much everyone on the mountain probably, assumed this was about Echo and the Azgeda. Representative Yeflin had dispatched two riders the day they began ‘negotiating’ a potential marriage agreement. One headed for Azgeda territory. The other headed for TonDC and then, they assumed, on toward Polis.

While Yeflin waited for his responses he was dragging out negotiations over a bride price as long as he could. Dear God, how she wished Nygel – Ark fixer and master of all illicit trade on the twelve stations – had survived. There was a woman she’d have loved to turn loose on Yeflin. Nygel might actually have enjoyed sitting across from the small-minded bastard while she frustrated his every move.

That had been more than ten days ago. Kane and his guards were watching all major approaches, north and east, with both drones and Rangers. There had been no movement along the main road south from Azgeda territory. Then yesterday, they spotted Indra and her party coming directly from TonDC.

Indra bowed all the way down to her shoulders, which Abby took as a meaningful gesture of respect. “Heda Griffen,” she said, in English. “We have received word from Yeflin Kom Azgeda that you are holding Echo Kom Azgeda hostage against the wishes of her people. I am here to investigate this charge on behalf of Commander Lexa.”

“You are always welcome on the mountain, Indra, for business or pleasure. I will arrange for you to meet with Echo Kom Azgeda.” Echo was actually waiting in the small conference room by Abby’s office. “Echo is here of her own free will, having asked for and received sanctuary and asylum here at Mt. Weather.”

“It is not Echo’s wishes that are at issue.”

“Representative Yeflin has made his objections clear, but under our laws and customs, an individual who has broken no law is free to choose to go or stay. Echo has made her own choice. We are bound to respect that.”

Indra was silent for a very long few minutes. Finally she said, “I begin to understand the problem. Please, I would like to talk with Echo.”

Abby escorted Indra into the fortress, leaving her companions/guards to set up their tents and make camp behind the plateau clinic. Echo declined Abby’s offer to stay with her for her interview with Indra, so Abby went immediately to find Marcus.
“That’s good,” he said, once she relayed what Indra had told her. “Lexa isn’t ready to jump into whatever is going on in Queen Nia’s court, and she wants to let Indra investigate. That may give us the breathing room we need to let nature take its course.”

“Unless Indra agrees with Yeflin, that for us to shelter those who freely leave their clans is an unacceptable violation of Coalition rules.”

“Yes,” he said. Then he raised his eyes to hers. “It’s not necessarily bad for this to come to a crisis now, you know.”

“Marcus!”

“No one is ready for much of a fight right now. The clans have been badly hurt in the last few years by the mountain cullings. If Wallace’s numbers are good, and all our experience suggests they are, the whole coalition, fully mobilized, could barely field thirty-five hundred troops right now. To the best of our knowledge, the clans haven’t re-armed themselves with modern weapons. We still have the firepower advantage to offset our smaller size. And we would be on the defense, which is the stronger position. This fortress has withstood a century-long siege already. We can make it a few months or even years longer if we need too. Maybe getting this over with sooner will make it shorter, burst the balloon before it’s fully inflated.”

“But what is it we are fighting about?!”

“Who makes the rules. Who controls the resources. Same things people always fight about.”

Abby frowned. “Women’s wombs should not be resources. And we make our own rules.”

“I agree. And that is a cause I’m willing to commit the Ark to. With the full support of our people, we will make and honor our own rules, particularly the right to grant sanctuary and asylum to whomever we please for whatever reasons seem good to us.”

“Even if it means war.”

Marcus nodded. “Even so.”

After her talk with Echo, Indra had sought out Yeflin and spoken with him, or more likely listened in silence to his arguments. Now Abby and Indra sat together, glaring in mutual incomprehension across Abby’s small conference table.

“Indra!” Abby exclaimed, “Echo’s condition is physical, not mental. It’s definitely not a measure of her strength of will or a test of her character!”

“A warrior must be strong. A woman must be strong. And then her birth will go fine.”

“That is bullshit, and if you have been chief of TonDC as long as I think you have, you must know that is bullshit. Labor and childbirth are hard and difficult and all kinds of things affect the outcome that have nothing to do with ‘strength’.”

Indra merely continued glowering fiercely, her hands wrapped around her belt in the absence of a hilt to grasp.

Abby forced her calmest, talking-to-a-difficult-patient voice and expression back into place. “Echo’s heart was weakened by severe anemia. Her anemia was caused by the Mountain Men bleeding her to death, only very slowly. Her uterus was scored by a Sankru blade when she was a girl. No ‘will’ or ‘character’ in the world will change those things.”
“She should have ducked faster.”

Abby debated shrieking in frustration, but decided not to. It would only bring guards and create
still more chaos. Instead she repeated, through only slightly clenched teeth, “Her baby is strong and
healthy. He deserves to live to be born, and she deserves to live to raise him. Which she can, if she
stays here and I can monitor her childbirth and intervene when necessary.”

“You cannot simply fall from the sky and start changing our practices to suit yourselves.”

In the big picture, Abby actually agreed completely with Indra. The Arkers had no special authority
here. God knew that many would find that the Ark’s own moral and ethical practices had been
suspect in the extreme while they waited out their purgatory in orbit. Now that they were returned
to the earth, all the Arkers wanted was to find a way to live with their new neighbors in some kind
of – if not peace, then at least a sort of equilibrium. Not to change them otherwise in any way.

In the details…. in the details it was impossible. Not when pregnant women presented on one’s
doorstep, pleading for assistance to see them and their children through to safety. Not when the
Arkers had the knowledge and the skills and the tools and, most of all, the will to help them.

This was also a world that desperately needed every healthy child it could get. With access to
standards in gynecological and obstetrical care that had been developed more than two centuries
ago(!), there was absolutely no reason to lose as many women and children as the clans did.

Abby reached a sudden decision. “Come with me,” she said and rose to her feet.

Indra rose and followed, but her expression remained deeply suspicious, and her jaw only tightened
as they drew up outside a room two floors down clearly labeled ‘Nursery.’

There weren’t many babies yet in the mountain, but there were some. Two pregnant women had
made it to the ground and delivered safely. Four infants and toddlers had also arrived, strapped to
their parents’ chests. These six little people had been joined by Mari Stynasdaughter’s three to
make nine. It wasn’t much of a beginning, but it wasn’t nothing. The women had put together a
childcare cooperative that freed four of them each day to do other work for the Ark.

Abby led the way in, smiling warmly at the sight of the children playing in the cheerful space. It
was painted in bright colors and filled with toys and books.

Mari’s dark, curly-haired twins were lying on their tummies on a blanket facing each other, raised
heads bobbing as they stared deeply into one another’s eyes and made funny faces. Like most tiny
babies it wasn’t entirely clear if they were reacting to each other, or to belly gas, but it was
nonetheless completely adorable.

“Indra, I’d like you to meet Nevyn and Symon,” Abby said, then she looked at Mari for permission
before scooping Nevyn up into her arms. “Nevyn, this is Indra.”

Nevyn regarded Indra solemnly, then suddenly smiled a wide, open-mouthed baby grin and
pumped his fists.

Abby looked at Indra. “Nevyn and Symon are fine, strong healthy boys. Mari is healthy now too.
All they needed was a little help to get them through a bad patch. That’s all Echo and her baby
need.”

Indra didn’t move.

“Would you like to hold him?” Abby asked.
“No,” she said. Then she turned on her heel and stalked out the door.

Abby sighed in frustration, handed Nevyn off to one of the other moms, and rushed after Indra.

Indra hadn’t gone far, she was still in the hall glaring at nothing. When she heard Abby she looked up. “That was not fair.”

“To whom?”

“To all the women who need not have died.”

“Indra, I can’t change your past. I can’t change that we killed mothers on the Ark who would not abide by our rules limiting childbirth. I can’t change that we landed on your doorstep, or that we destroyed the Mountain Men to save our own children. But now we finally have a chance to do it differently – your people and mine. To do better. To be better. To build a better world for our children and our grandchildren.”

“Yeﬂin Kom Azgeda has requested that the Coalition mobilize to re-conquer the Mountain.”

Abby raised her brow. “Re-conquer? We conquered the Mountain alone. Clarke and Bellamy and our children conquered the Mountain. After the Coalition retreated from the field.”

Indra bowed her head and opened her hand, acknowledging the hit.

Then she raised her eyes to Abby’s “We have not heard directly from Queen Nia in this. The Coalition should not be a tool in disputes internal to member clans.”

“And so?”

“And so we will do nothing. We will not aid the Azgeda if they choose to attack the Mountain to reclaim that which is theirs, Echo Kom Azgeda and her unborn son.”

“But?” Abby said, hearing the word in Indra’s pregnant pause.

“But we will not prevent them from crossing Trikru territory on the southern road to reach you.”

Marcus actually laughed in relieved delight when Abby reported Indra’s decision. “I wonder how badly they would like us to hurt the Azgeda,” he said, his eyes glowing wickedly.

“You don’t think the Azgeda alone are a threat?”

“I think they can make a great deal of trouble if they come in force. Burn out our new fields, maybe damage Camp Jaha and the Drop Ship if they were really determined. But, based on our intelligence collected by Bellamy’s party last fall combined with Wallace’s numbers, the Azgeda have less than 2,000 warriors total right now and that’s if they strip every possible young adult away from all other work. That’s not enough to take the mountain.”

“I don’t understand how you can be so sanguine about this.”

“I’m not, Abby,” he said, sober and grave once again. “They could do a great deal of damage directly, or we could cause even more damage as we fight to push them out. We would also face the challenge of hurting them badly enough that they leave but not wiping them out and further destabilizing the political balance of this region or causing the rest of the Coalition to decide to rush to their rescue. The Coalition acting together could force us into the mountain for what could possibly be a very lengthy siege.”
Abby sighed. “So. Back between a rock and a hard place?”

“Back again,” Marcus agreed with a wry smile. “Feels more comfortable than it should, doesn’t it?”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: In case anyone else is geeky enough to be interested in demographics and how I arrived at Marcus’s numbers….

What we’ve seen of the clans (limited, I know) is that they are still basically a scavenger culture, barely surviving, and what industry and agriculture they must have (horses, pillar candles, bread rolls in the meal they didn’t eat together) is pretty limited. They are also out of healers…. Or, and this is the biggest - why else would they be so worried about 100 teenagers? Unless their own numbers are so small that 100 kids crash-landing are a substantial enough number relative to their own to be perceived as a threat.

Taken together, I decided they can’t be very big or very dense (yet) population wise. So I went back and found population figures for pre-contact through 1800 Native American populations in the regions of the story. These groups were pastoralists, that is they lived in agricultural villages and did some (limited) seasonal moving about for hunting purposes but mostly farmed/gardened. Pretty similar to what it looks like the various clans of the coalition do.

I also decided – based on the slim clues of “Ice Nation” and “Queen Nia” that the Azgeda are bigger and stronger than the other clans, but not in the geographic center so the Trikru get pride of political place. I ended up projecting a total population for the Ice Nation – which I’ve decided occupies an area similar to/overlapping the lands of the Five (later Six) Nations of the Iroquois Confederation – at 25,000 – which was the historical peak of the Iroquois Confederation just before 1700 or so. I’ve decided that the rest of the clans together have about 20,000 people. The area could support something closer to 30,000 at that tech level – but they’ve clearly been very hard hit by the mountain men for the last 50 years, pushing their numbers down. So that’s a total of 45,000 people as of our story.

The most aggressive estimate for a population of that size that could be fighters/warriors is ten percent, or 4,500. Ten percent – in case you are wondering – is REALLY HIGH. For comparison – in 1945, the United States had 12.2 million people serving in the armed forces, or just under nine percent of the US population of 139.9 million people that year. Further, only roughly 60 percent, or 7.6 million of those people were in combat roles, or just about five percent of the US population taken as a whole. Think about what an impact that made on the people of the US, then and since. So a more reasonable, but still potentially devastating (if lost) militarily available percentage of the manpower of the whole Coalition is closer to five percent – or 2,250 warriors. All this just hand waves away the fact that between the Mountain and Clarke and the delinquents, the Coalition lost about 800 warriors in the previous autumn – 300 at the drop ship, 200 something as reapers and another 300 in the blood program (adjusting for however many they recovered) and however many warriors died when the missile hit TonDC. They could be scraping bottom – putting teenagers and middle
aged adults with families to support – back into the line to come up with even 3,000 warriors. Assuming my overall population figures are reasonable.

On the other hand – it’s clear that the show runners suck really hard at math. For the Ark to have a population of 2,300 at the start of the story, 97 years after starting up with a population of just 400 survivors (of whom we will assume for no good reason are at least 50 percent people able to bear children), and after at least one generation of enforcing a one child per woman mandate so as to engineer a population crash – means that the first two generations of women on the Ark had to have something like SIX to SEVEN KIDS EACH. PER WOMAN. Which is so incredibly unreasonable I can’t even come up with any story to make THAT seem like a good plan. Hatched by scientists no less. Magic. It’s just space magic.
“Shit,” Bellamy said. He held out his hand to Miller. “Give me that.”

Nathan handed over the beanbag shotgun and Bellamy swung it into position, aimed and fired up into the branches above them. This produced a very satisfying screech of pain, and then an ungainly scramble as the young guard tried in vain to keep from falling out of the tree.

Bellamy stalked over to where the kid had landed with a thump and was now clutching his elbow and trying not to whimper. He raised his voice, the better to be heard throughout the area, “If I can spot you, you better believe the Azgeda warriors can and will. And they won’t be shooting beanbags. They’ll be shooting poisoned arrows!” He was bellowing as he finished, “Do better!”

“Bellamy!” Nathan said, from where he was kneeling by the kid. “I think his elbow is at least sprained, maybe broken. You gotta cut back, man, or we won’t have to wait for the Azgeda to take us out.”

Bellamy turned his glare on Nathan. “That’s Major Blake to you, Senior Cadet Miller.”

Then, somewhat distantly aware of what an ass he sounded like but having trouble caring enough to figure out how to apologize without sounding like an even bigger dick, Bellamy spun on his heel and headed back to his horse. “Send for a medic for Hemswood,” he called out to the closest black uniform he saw, “and detail another cadet to take him back to the base clinic.”

After he swung up on his horse and settled back into the saddle, he caught Lincoln’s expression. “Don’t look at me like that,” he said.

“Like what?”

“All full of silent judgment and shit. You got something to say, say it.”

“Nothing to say, Major Blake.”

Which is exactly what Lincoln said for the rest of the day. Nothing. But Bellamy could feel the weight of his eyes the whole rest of their circuit of the interior line. It kept him in his saddle when he might have come out of it, and his voice calmer than it might have been otherwise.

He felt it even when he left Lincoln and Miller behind with the horses and made his way to the field clinic at their base camp, set up on a hill overlooking the main road down from the north, some six kilometers inside Ark Territory. “How’s he doing, O?” he asked in a low voice as soon as he spotted her.

“Fine. A sprain I think, not a break. If it’s not substantially better by tomorrow though, I’m sending him back to the mountain for an X-ray, in case it’s a hairline fracture.”

“Good,” and he smiled at her, “you sound like you really know what you’re doing, little sister.”

“Because I do, big brother. I passed all my field medic tests. And I also know that you need to dial it back. You’re scaring people again.”

Bellamy nodded, knowing she was right and hating it but he couldn’t quite seem to get it all under control. He needed to do better, too. He turned away and went to drag over a stool to sit with Hemswood. He was a scrawny, eighteen-year-old kid from Mecha who had survived earthfall. “I’m
Hemsworth swallowed hard, “I wasn’t well enough camouflaged, sir.”

“Right,” Bellamy nodded, working to gentle his voice as he said, “You weren’t. Let’s go over it again, okay? What should you have been doing?”

He listened and encouraged as the kid tried to recall his instructions to the letter.

The next two days were better. He wasn’t sure if the guards were actually improving or if he was letting up on his standards but he was prepared to say that the guards were, at last, adequate. They might have a chance at actually surviving an encounter with grounder troops. Even the Hemsworth kid was back in line, his elbow sore but improving.

Their plan – to let the Azgeda into Ark Territory, then trap them in the road where it ran through a depression between two berms and force a surrender, or engineer a slaughter – might even work. That they were less than twenty miles from Antietam, Maryland and site of ‘Bloody Lane’ – the single deadliest day of the entire four-year US Civil War – Bellamy thought was an irony or a warning. Maybe both.

On the third day, he was escorting Kane along their perimeter to show him their plans. They came upon the squad that was supposed to be watching the main road itself from a forward position right on the border. (A boundary the Ark was scrupulously observing under the very watchful eye of a handful of Trikru warriors posted along its length.) They discovered nearly the whole squad sprawled on camp chairs while just one guard manned the electronic surveillance.

They all scrambled to their feet, of course, once they finally heard the horses, and rushed to look like they had been paying attention. But it was too damn late. Bellamy sent his axe flying into the ground between the squad leader’s feet. He was bounding off his horse as soon as the axe left his hand, his voice already raised as he stalked over to her, “If I was Azgeda, you’d be dead, Sergeant! You can’t rely only on electronic surveillance! This whole command depends on you doing your fucking job, which is to watch this road and give the signal as soon as you spot the Azgeda column! If they sneak around behind you and take you out first, we’ll all be dead! You’d be dead! And everyone at the mountain that much more at risk! I oughta bounce your ass back to cadet, or even the hell out of the guard for a stunt like this!”

“Major Blake!” Kane bellowed, louder than Bellamy but just barely, “Stand down!”

Bellamy was literally shaking with rage, looming over the shorter Sergeant with his face mere inches away from hers. It took him a few, very gasping breaths before he was able to relax enough to lean back into his heels and finally lift up his feet enough to turn away. “Yes, Sir,” he managed at last.

“Sergeant,” Kane said, “step away with me for a moment, please?”

Bellamy retreated further, to the other side of the horses, and reached for his canteen with a weak hand. After taking a long pull, he looked up and caught Nathan Miller watching him. “I know,” he said. “I need to dial it back. I just…” he trailed off, at a loss for words, everything just a confusing jumble inside his head.

Echo. The baby. Clarke. The Azgeda. The Mountain. The Trikru. The Coalition of Clans. The baby. His people. How in the hell could he save his people, after creating the whole damn mess in the first place, if the guard was full of entirely incompetent Arkers who wouldn’t take directions from a factory-born janitor?
“We know, man,” Nathan said quietly, in a surprisingly compassionate tone. “We all know. But you gotta believe us, Bellamy. It is not all on you. Everybody can and will do what they have to do, and do it well. Trust our training. And we aren’t running, we’re holding. Just like you told us we should do at the Drop Ship. We didn’t listen then, and we lost crucial time, but we are listening now.”

“Yeah, well,” Bellamy managed a tiny smile, grateful for the comfort and for the very belated apology. “Clarke’s always sure she knows better.”

“Sometimes she really does,” Miller said. “She knew the Wallaces were bad news the moment she met them.”

Bellamy nodded. He knew. Without her instincts and her determination, they might never have been able to save even as many as they did.

“Trust her,” Miller said, “Whatever she’s doing, she’s got her reasons, and they’re good ones.”

“I just wish we knew where in the hell she is right now.”

“You and everyone else, Major,” Kane was back. “Sergeant Na understands better now, too.” Kane held out his hand, “Your axe.”

“Thank you sir,” Bellamy said, only blushing a little. “Should I speak to her?”

“No. She’s fine. But I want you and your squad, including Lincoln and Octavia, to head back to the Mountain. Take forty-eight hours R and R, starting immediately.”

“Sir!” he protested.

“You’ve been on the line for seven days straight, driving yourself harder than anyone else. You’re losing focus. Let someone more rested take a turn.”

Bellamy opened his mouth and Kane added, “That’s an order, Major.”

They stayed at their base camp that night, then rode hard the next morning and made it to the plateau by early afternoon on a bright, sunny day.

Where, to Bellamy’s utter consternation, Raven and Echo were engaged in wheel chair racing. They were each being pushed by a running kid, maybe eleven or twelve, along a course laid out on the dirt trails that spider-webbed across the high ground, connecting the various buildings and the main road to the gate itself. A small crowd of other kids was cheering them on, jumping and shrieking in excitement as they rounded the last corner. The two kids pushing were running hard. Echo and Raven each helping out by pushing her own wheels as fast as she could. They crossed the finish line to rousing cheers, Echo winning by a chair-length. Their assistants dug in their heels and pulled them to a gravel-shifting stop next to each other, where they promptly exchanged high-fives while whooping in glee.

“How could you do something so stupid? So dangerous?” Bellamy wasn’t even sure when or how he got off his horse, but now he was striding toward them, yelling at the top of his lungs.

They both looked up in shock.

“Bellamy,” Echo said, “You’re back.”

“Hey, Bellamy,” Raven said with a wide smile, aiming for conciliatory. “It’s okay. We’re all cool
here. We’ve been practicing for days.”

This was the opposite of what Bellamy wanted to hear. He turned on Echo, “How could you be so reckless and irresponsible? You know that anything or nothing at all could start the bleeding and your heart can’t take the adrenaline rush right now, and this is exactly why you’ve been put on bed rest...” his voice got louder and lower, taking on the deep growl of pure panicked fury the longer he carried on.

Echo’s expression shifted from shocked to guilty to angry and then she shot to her feet, yelling right back, waving her hands in his face, “You have no authority to tell me how best to manage my own care...”

His “Sit down!” was so loud and abrupt she actually dropped back into her chair.

She looked as surprised as he felt that she’d followed his order. And then he realized what a ginormous spectacle he was making and what an overweening asshole he was being and only the awareness that bursting into tears would terrify everyone kept him from doing it. He took a step closer and fell to his knees in front of Echo instead. Putting his hands on the arms of the chair, as much to keep himself from falling further as anything else, he said as quietly as he could manage, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t have yelled at you. I, it, you...” he flailed for a moment for words, “I was just really caught off guard.”

After examining his face, and then holding his eyes with her own for long enough for his breathing to finally ease, she shook her head and lifted one corner of her mouth into a very small smile. “I understand. I’d be shocked too, if our positions were reversed.”

“Thanks,” he croaked in a strangled whisper of relief, but she heard him.

She took his hands in her own and placed them on her belly. “He’s moving. Can you feel him?”

Bellamy nodded, entranced as always with the reality of a new life, one he helped to create, moving under Echo’s skin.

“I think he recognized your voice,” she murmured.

“My yelling?” Bellamy said, looking up at her, leaving his hands on her belly, his son’s tiny foot pressing into his palm. “I don’t want him only to know me by my yelling.”

“Then talk to him,” she said, and she leaned forward to put her arms around Bellamy’s shoulders and pull him close for a hug. “Besides,” she whispered into his ear, “I know you yell because you care.”

He held her tightly, trying to let her know how much he regretted his behavior. Once he relaxed and shifted back onto his heels, he caught her eyes. “I have better ways.”

“Yes,” she smiled, “You do.”

“Want to go get some pie?”
“Come’on, Lincoln,” Raven said, waving her forklift of apple pie in Lincoln’s general direction, “You’ve got to have more intel on this Roan character that Clarke picked up in Polis. Tell us!”

“Yeah!” Wick said, “Spill, man. What kind of guy is our Clarke riding with?”

Lincoln sighed audibly. “I just told you.”

“All you said was that he was shunned for walking away from the Trikru, for refusing to follow orders.”

“That’s all you asked.”

“Okay, fine,” Raven said, narrowing her eyes at him and wondering why he was being so damn dodgy. Usually he was really good-natured about playing cultural translator. “Now I’m asking for all you’ve got.”

When Lincoln didn’t say anything more, Echo spoke up. “I’ve never seen him, that I know of, but he’s famous. Or maybe, infamous. I’ve heard he’s at least seven feet tall, or taller. A giant among men. That he can cross whole forests in a single leap. That he can shoot seven deer with one arrow. That he can hit a butterfly with his throwing axe. That his sword is faster than a flash of light. That he can outdrink and outeat any ten men. That he can have sex for days, wearing out partner after partner. That…”

Lincoln interrupted her. “That’s all ridiculous.”

“Perhaps,” Echo shrugged, casting her eyes at Bellamy’s profile. He was sitting so close to her they might as well be in the same chair. Raven couldn’t decide if it was clever of Echo to accept his dramatic apology, or maddening. Domineering asshole had actually pulled Raven aside to hiss that if he caught her ‘aiding and abetting insanity like that one more time’ he would personally relocate her wheelchair to the bottom of the lake. Much as she hated the damn thing, it was way too useful for a fate like that. And Wick would bitch endlessly about making her another one.

Meanwhile, Bellamy was watching Lincoln with an attitude a lot like a big cat waiting to strike at its prey.

“I’ve also heard,” Echo continued, looking back to Lincoln, “that he’s a ghost. That he died in the wilderness long ago, but his spirit hasn’t yet found a worthy new host. So he wanders the wild lands, helping the deserving and destroying the guilty. That he feeds on the spirits of the dead.”

“He is not a ghost,” Lincoln said, clearly even more annoyed by this story than the last, “And he eats food like any other man.”

Echo smiled innocently, “These are the stories that I’ve heard.”

“He’s a man. Just a man,” Lincoln said, with the air of one shutting down debate. “He argued with The Commander and left rather than obey her orders, which is why he is shunned. He’s not unusually tall, there are plenty of men as good or better than he is with a bow or an axe, and he doesn’t drink alcohol at all. Or at least, he didn’t last I knew. And he is NOT a wandering spirit.”
Raven offered Echo a mental salute for the way she’d found to get Lincoln talking.

“If he’s just a man, how is it that Echo heard about him, all the way up in the Ice Nation?” Wick asked. “Even if some of the tales do sound a LOT like old Paul Bunyan stories,” he added with a quick side-eye at Echo.

Lincoln glowered at his plate, but didn’t answer.

“According to Abby Griffin,” Bellamy said, taking a turn, “Indra told her that Roan is a childhood friend of her son Duncan’s. She said that if he’s agreed to ride with them, Clarke is in good hands.”

“She said that?” Lincoln sounded surprised.

“Yes,” Bellamy said, his face in the particularly open expression that he adopted when he was working his persuasion magic. Raven liked to think it didn’t work on her. She knew she was kidding herself. It worked on everyone. Even Echo, who should have decked him for the stunt he pulled up on the plateau a little while ago, was letting him earn his way back into her bed from the couch, or possibly the floor, that he belonged on. “Why? You don’t agree?” Bellamy added.

It worked on Lincoln too.

“Well,” Lincoln said, sounding completely disgruntled, “that’s true as far as it goes. Roan and Duncan were crèche mates in Polis. And if he has offered Clarke his protection, he will fight to the death to honor that.”

“But there’s more, isn’t there,” said Octavia. “You got really squirrely and Wes just got mad when his name came up. And Kavan looked like he was going to puke.”

Lincoln looked at Octavia for a long moment, then he let his shoulders sag and nodded. Looking at the table, he said, “Did Indra mention to Dr. Griffin that Roan is Lexa’s older brother?”

“No,” said Bellamy, looking like he’d just received an unexpected gut punch. Raven felt almost the same.

“He expected, everyone expected, the seers would name him Heda when the last Heda passed. They chose Lexa instead. She was still nearly a child herself, barely selected as a second to Anya then, while he was already a powerful war leader, despite his relative youth.”

“Why was he passed over?” Bellamy asked.

“He wanted the Trikru to fight the mountain. He wanted to find the old guns. Build gas masks to survive the killing fogs. He hunted mountain men and killed them, to prove we could, which only made the culling worse. He frightened people. Caused fights. Created trouble. And finally left.”

“And now?” Bellamy asked.

“And now he hunts secrets. He knows more about every clan’s business than one man should. He can do things others can’t, because a man with no clan can visit any of them.”

“So, he’s like, a fixer? Or a spy?” Wick asked.

“Some of both, maybe. But it is dangerous to know him too well. Lexa’s lover Costia was killed for knowing him.”

“What?” Raven exclaimed.
Echo answered. “She was captured in a border skirmish. I have no idea what she was doing out there. Possibly attempting to prove her worth to her commander. And she was tortured, to see if she would tell what she knew of her commander’s secrets.” She looked at Lincoln again, her brow raised, “Roan’s secrets, I assume?”

Lincoln nodded. “Roan has been hunting the old weapons and old knowledge for most of his life. I’ve assumed that Nia hoped Roan had told something to Lexa, and Lexa in turn had confided in Costia.”

Octavia frowned. “Did she know any?”

“No. These are not secrets Roan would have shared, even with Lexa,” Lincoln said. “If anyone did know, it would have been Anya, and Anya would have died rather than break his trust.”

“Okay, so that’s tragic for Costia and Lexa,” Octavia said, “But do you all look so,” and she made an ooga-booga face and waved her hands, “whaaa! When Roan’s name comes up?”

When Lincoln looked up at Octavia, his eyes were hot and shiny with anger. “Because he was right, and we were wrong. The Mountain could be defeated. They were just men like us, only using better tools than we were using. We’ve lost thousands of people over the last fifteen years, lives destroyed, villages wiped out. People that maybe, if we’d listened to Roan then, maybe would have had a fighting chance. How do any of us live with that?”

Only Bellamy met his gaze full on. “Three hundred and twenty people committed suicide because I destroyed a radio that might have let them know their sacrifice was unnecessary. Some of them might even have made it to the ground. That I didn’t know that might happen, doesn’t make them not dead. You didn’t know, then, that Roan was right. In fact, it sounds like everyone else thought he was the crazy one.”

Lincoln dropped his eyes.

Bellamy waited a beat longer, then said, “Clarke went to find old weapons. Could he be helping her now?”

“Possibly,” Lincoln said, “If it advanced some cause of his.”

“What are his causes?”

“Himself. His daughter. The Trigedakru. The clans. In that order.”

“Daughter?” Octavia asked.

“Yes. His daughter. Anya’s daughter.”

Everyone absorbed that in silence for a while. Finally Wick asked the question. “What would he do if he knew Clarke was responsible for Anya’s death?”

“Kill her.”

The silence that followed this was deafening.

Bellamy eventually asked for all of them, “So where the hell are they?”
Prairie Dogs

Bellamy shifted again, trying to find a more comfortable position to doze in the sun filtering down through the thickening green of the forest canopy. The problem was trying to find space for his legs in the cramped front seat of the open jeep.

A beep from the tablet on the dashboard brought him upright, and then he heard the crackling in the leaves as people climbed the ridgeline just ahead of them.

He pulled his shotgun back into his lap, but he also left his leg propped up on the doorframe.

A few minutes later five figures, their faces still wrapped in scarves, crested the ridge and began to make their way down to the small convoy of three jeeps waiting for them. Once they were on level ground, the leader finally unwound his scarf as he walked toward the jeep. “Bellamy,” he said.

“Murphy,” Bellamy replied. “We thought you might like to ride the rest of the way.” He gestured at the other vehicles. “As soon as you introduce your friends.”

Murphy nodded, then looked at his companions. They all pulled off their scarves and shook themselves out. As their faces were exposed to the sun, Bellamy could see the tattoos that marked the two Sankru men, and the twisted lip and cleft palate that marked the nomad boy. And a short, wiry young woman with a swirl of Clan marks tattooed across her face who had to be Murphy’s nomad girl. What was her name? He remembered. “Emori?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Murphy said. “This is Emori.”

“Honor to meet you, Bellamy Blake kom Skaikru,” she said.

Murphy quickly introduced the rest, then sent them to the other vehicles. He took the passenger side of Bellamy’s jeep and Emori clambered into the back seat. “I about had a heart attack when that stupid guide drone started talking to me in your voice,” he said once he was settled.

Bellamy laughed, turning the ignition and then backing up and pulling around to head for Mt. Weather. “Yeah. Thought you’d appreciate that.”

“Well, it’s certainly nicer to ride instead of walk the last … twenty miles?”

“About nineteen direct, more like twenty-two on the roads,” Bellamy said. “There’s water in the bag in the back.”

Emori handed over a canteen. Bellamy waited until Murphy had drunk about half of it down in a single go before he asked, “So what happened?”

“Jaha and his crazy goddess happened.”

Bellamy glanced over, just to make sure that Murphy wasn’t kidding. He didn’t look like he was kidding.

“Her?” Bellamy hazarded a guess.

“Her,” Murphy said, his heavy tone laced with agreement and significance. “A couple of drones showed up at my bunker about a month-and-a-half ago, made it clear I was to go with them. I found Jaha – at a really sweet house on the shore – and Her. ALIE. His goddess. Very hot, very scary,
holographic lady AI computer. She has a message she wants delivered to Mt. Weather and the grounder leadership.”

“What’s Her message?”

“No. More. War.”

“Huh,” Bellamy said, too surprised for anything else. “That’s nice, but…”

“She’s got nukes. She’ll use them.”

Adrenaline shot up Bellamy’s spine and made him sound far more accusatory than he intended.

“How the fuck does she have nukes?”

“Jaha rode to earth in an old space-to-ground missile. He didn’t take out the warheads. Now she has them. Ten of them. Which she will use to punish anyone who breaks her peace.”

“Holy shit.”

“Exactly.”

“No. Really.” It was odd, Bellamy thought, how calm he felt right now. His feverish panic of the last weeks evaporated completely in the face of this new, potentially calamitous development, and he felt vaguely like he was floating. “We’re expecting a small war any day now.”

“Why the hell do you think we cut straight through the waste? We know. She has access to the same satellites you do. A war band about two-hundred strong left the Ice Nation capital over a week ago, headed straight for you. My job is to stop all fighting or we all – meaning every human still on the east coast – suffer the consequences. And Jaha sent a message too.” Murphy held up a small recording device. “He slipped it into my pocket when he hugged me good-bye. Which was weird as fuck, just saying. The hug, I mean.”

“What’s his message?”

“You got me. It’s just a recording of what he said to me then – he sounded completely off his rocker. Like some sort of cross between an Old Testament prophet, Obi Wan Kenobi and Morpheus. Plus a whole lot of mad scientist shit. But he obviously wanted me to bring it to Kane, so I’m guessing it’s some sort of old people code.”

“Tell me more about the war band you saw.”

“I didn’t see it myself, but I’ll tell you what I know.” And he spent the rest of the drive filling Bellamy in on his last six months, his slow search for nomads, his gradual approach to them once he found them, way too many details about how he eventually found Emori and her brother Otan, and finally more information about Jaha and ALIE, his computerized goddess.

They drove straight to the garages and then used the elevators to reach the council’s big conference room. Chancellor Griffin, Kane and the rest were all waiting for them, and Murphy was refreshingly succinct in his second recounting. Then he played the recording.

At first, Kane and the other council members did nothing but scrunch up their faces in intense confusion as they listened to Jaha’s otherworldly sermon. There was no other way to characterize the nearly twenty minutes of uninterrupted monologuing delivered to an audience of one. John Murphy, outward skeptic, and Bellamy suspected, inward believer.
Kane’s mouth suddenly relaxed. He sat up and looked at the rest of them sitting around the large conference table. “Professor Bashir?” he asked, “Does that sound like Professor Bashir to you? That reference to Prairie Dogs? And was Jaha talking about Ruth Mbege’s thesis on faith after Armageddon?”

“Play it again,” Sinclair said.

They did.

“Yeah,” Sinclair said, nodding vigorously. “Yeah. It does sound like Bashir.”

Alex Kwok added, “I studied Dr. Mbege’s work for my senior thesis. With Thelonious as a tutor, by the way. That definitely sounds like some of her stuff.”

“Who are Professor Bashir and Dr. Mbege?” Bellamy asked.

“Secondary school teachers and scholars. He passed away, what fifteen, eighteen years ago?” Emily Hanushka answered him, looking at Abby Griffin, who nodded. “He taught computer science to grades ten and eleven for, what, twenty-five years? At least?”

“And Dr. Mbege,” Dr. Griffin looked at Bellamy and Murhpy, “John’s grandmother. She died closer to ten years ago. Cancer. She taught sociology and theology.”

“Who was teaching compsci before Earthfall?” Kane asked.

“Jim Xu,” Sinclair said, but he was shaking his head sadly. “He died in the breakup after Diana Sydney took the Exodus Ship.”

“Okay… well, who’s teaching it now? Anyone?”

Abby looked up. “Andrea Cho. She’s teaching it, but there aren’t many kids in it right now. She’s handling it in a twice a week session.”

“Would she remember that whole extended Prairie Dog metaphor? Something about independent parts and echo location and redundant hive behaviors….something, something, something…” Kane drifted off. He caught Bellamy’s eye and lifted one corner of his mouth in a tiny, rueful smile, “Computer science was not one of my better subjects. But I think Jaha’s trying to tell us something about ALIE’s architecture. And her god-complex.”

The council members fell deeper into conversations of their school days, backing up Jaha’s ranting to listen again to particular stretches while calling for Andrea Cho and a copy of Dr. Mbege’s thesis.

Murphy leaned close to Bellamy as they walked out after being dismissed and barked a low, short laugh. “What did I tell you, Bellamy? Old people code.”
Cease Fire

The Meetinghouse felt crowded, Bellamy thought. More crowded than it had been since Solstice. There were too many people at this meeting for even an especially large table. A podium had been set up, flanked by two tables to accommodate the speakers. The audience filled several rows of benches – including Yeflin and his entire party, Indra and Lexa and their cohorts, Luna of the Flokru and her advisors, and most of the senior scientists and detail leaders of the Ark. Octavia and Lincoln were also present, standing behind the tables and quietly translating.

Chancellor Griffin was on her feet behind the podium at the head of the room, concluding her opening presentation, “…We believe Chancellor Jaha. We believe that ALIE, and the threat she represents is real. Certainly, the nuclear warheads are real. They were not primed or armed while we were in orbit, but these are relatively straightforward steps. ALIE can, we believe, do as she promises and send these warheads to each of our capital cities if we engage in anything she determines passes her test for ‘war between nations’. Our only hope is that we can – all of us – refrain from any hostilities that rise to that level. That through cooperation and generous understanding we can work together to resolve any disputes peacefully, at least long enough to find a more permanent way to eliminate this threat to us all.”

After she fell silent, Representative Yeflin lumbered to his feet. Bellamy was sure that the man had actually put on weight in the weeks since he arrived, the Mountain’s resources and cooks catering to his insatiable sweet tooth.

This had done nothing to diminish Bellamy’s desire to punch him in the face.

“He said Griffin,” said Yeflin, “I have heard your words and watched your squiggles on the wall.” He meant the slide show she had used to illustrate her presentation of ALIE’s threat. “While that is all very impressive,” his tone made it clear that he didn’t think it was in the least bit impressive, “the end appears to be your demand that we all simply do your bidding. That is unacceptable.”

Abby nodded, her expression serious. “I’m aware that it could sound like that, Representative Yeflin kom Azgeda. I know that for now you have only our word that this threat is real. That the warheads are real. That they are on Earth, and in ALIE’s control. So I have other voices for you to hear. I would like to invite Emori kom Flokru to speak of her knowledge of ALIE and her City of Light.”

Emori, looking remarkably poised to be facing this gathering, though with her hands clasped firmly behind her back, took the Chancellor’s place and began to explain her knowledge of the City of Light.

After Emori finished, her brother Otan spoke, followed by the two Sankru men. Each of them testifying that while the City of Light did not, as such, exist any more, it’s ruins did, and that beyond the ruins lay ALIE’s house. Where they earned her favor by bringing her old tech they searched out in the waste.

Old tech like Jaha’s missile, to be specific. The two men had been part of the team that hauled it across the wastes to the shore and floated it over to ALIE.

Lexa rose to her feet once the last Sankru man completed his report. “So, if we concede that this threat is real, you spoke of a permanent solution to the problem?”

Bellamy couldn’t help himself; he leaned into Echo and whispered, “Right. Because who would
want to give up warfare indefinitely in exchange for peaceful coexistence?”

She murmured reprovingly, “We all do. But each of us only on our own terms.”

Bellamy humphed quietly, but didn’t try to verbalize what he was thinking – which was that maybe ALIE was right. Maybe humans really were too stupid to live. The four days since Murphy had arrived with his electrifying warning had not been edifying. Wild accusations, mad panic and a few fists had been thrown around. But at least the Commander and Luna had agreed to come and listen, bringing representatives from most of the other clans with them in their trains.

“Commander Lexa,” Chancellor Griffin was saying, “Yes. I did. Any computer can be hacked. Some just take a lot more care than others. ALIE is, in the end, a program. With the death of the World Wide Internet, and with limited sources of electricity and spare parts, her reach is small and her days are numbered. This gives us the opportunity to plan a two-pronged assault, one on her programming and one against her physical resources. These will take time to plan and coordinate. I don’t know how long, and I hesitate to make any promises.”

This was greeted with a great deal of muttering and shifting. The Chancellor raised her hands and gestured for quiet. “I know. It is not the answer we would like either. But rushing could trip ALIE’s defenses and prompt her to launch her warheads with no further provocation. On the other hand, I am not seeking some sort of permanent alliance or treaty amongst us. Merely a complete cease-fire for the next twelve months, during which we stay in open, regular communication with each other. Once ALIE has been neutralized, we can either end our truce or negotiate more permanent agreements.”

Yeflin’s assistant shot to his feet, but once Griffin recognized him he turned to offer Yeflin his arm. “Heda Griffin,” Yeflin said over a breathy wheeze, “I do not intend offense.”

Like hell, Bellamy thought. Of course Yeflin intended offense.

“But I do not believe you. I think instead this is an elaborate hoax designed for us to release our claim on Echo kom Azgeda and her unborn child.”

The Chancellor was so stunned by this accusation that her mouth actually fell open but she could marshal no words.

Kane stepped into the gap. “I am complimented by your belief that we would be so audacious. That we would invite Commander Lexa and Heda Luna to an emergency meeting under the threat of nuclear destruction merely to pressure you to reach an accord on Echo’s marriage to a member of the Skaikru.”

“You must know that a large Azgeda war band is on the way even as we speak,” Yeflin shot back, his breathing steady again now that he was on his feet. “They will be at your border within the week. Of course you would seek to avoid combat. Your warriors are no match for our own.”

Bellamy actually spent a few heartbeats indulging his fantasy scenario of taking down Yeflin. A palm strike to the solar plexus, a fist to the jaw, then a leg sweep to drop him to the ground.

“Yes. We are aware of your war band. And you are correct.” Kane paused, using his over-long silence to highlight the portions of Yeflin’s assertions he was not going to address. “We are now absolutely determined to avoid combat.”

“Then return us our daughter.”

“She is not ours to return. By our laws, Echo kom Azgeda belongs to none but herself.”
Yeflin shrugged. His smile was vulpine. “Then you invite war. And, if your squiggles are correct, risk a second cataclysm.”

Into the dangerously awkward silence that followed this threat, Echo stood. “You may escort me home, Yeflin.”

Bellamy thought his heart actually stopped beating for a moment.

The whole room twisted and turned to see Echo.

She continued speaking. “I believe Dr. Griffin and General Kane. They truly fear this ALIE and her bombs. I will not be the cause for a second cataclysm.”

“No!” Bellamy was on his feet, seizing her shoulder so she would look at him. “You can’t do that! That is crazy, you can’t do this!” He turned to Yeflin, at last willing to plead with a man he loathed, “You’re asking her to risk her life! Echo is in no condition to travel! What you’re asking her for is just short of suicide!”

“I know you will do anything to steal what is rightfully ours!” Yeflin was so angry his voice boomed over the muttering crowd. “Echo and her children belong to us. This world belongs to us! You don’t belong here, Skaikru. In our lands, in our mountain, taking our women and our warriors from us!”

“So you’ll make Echo pay for our actions, though she is not responsible for them? What kind of pathetic excuse for a man asks a pregnant woman to make that sacrifice?”

Yeflin rocked back on his feet, his eyes wide and his face flushing. “Do you insult me, Bellamy Blake kom Skaikru?”

“Hell yes, I’m insulting you! You and the horse you rode in on, you sorry son of a bitch! Leave Echo here, where she needs to be!”

“Bellamy!” Echo tugged him around to face her, “Stop it. This is my choice!”

Yeflin was already roaring something or another in Azgedasleng, his men were on their feet, the rest of the grounders were rising to theirs and suddenly black uniformed guardsmen were converging on Bellamy and Echo and Kane was banging his gavel on the table and calling for order.

Echo turned to face Bellamy squarely, her hands on his chest, and around them all the chaos faded away. “This was inevitable, with or without ALIE,” she said. “I can’t ask you or your people to fight a war to protect me. Ask anyone to trade their lives for mine. Won’t risk nuclear destruction a second time! My gamble only worked if my people didn’t learn of my pregnancy until it was over.”

“Echo…!”

“No. I’m sorry. I wanted it to be different, but it’s too much, and too soon. Our world hasn’t changed enough for me to break with my people over this.”

“Fuck the world. This is your life. Our son’s life!”

“All I have to do is survive long enough to get him into my sisters’ care. I can do that.”

“All? No. You have to live. For both of you. For all of us.”
She didn’t answer. They both knew that was a promise she could no longer make. Instead she raised her hands to his face and pulled him in to press her lips to his.

He felt his whole future slipping through his fingers in her kiss and he fought to snatch it back before he lost it all. “Okay. I’m going with you,” he said.

“Bellamy…” Her expression was a crazy mix of terror and gratitude and relief. He could also tell she thought the right thing to do was turn him down, however much she wanted him to come with her. He kissed her again to stop her words.

He took her hand, his confidence that this was the right path roaring in as she responded by gripping his fingers firmly with her own. He turned and raised his voice to be heard over the restless crowd. “We will both go.”

“You can’t! You have no standing in her life!” Yeflin declared, obviously waffling between outrage that Bellamy asked and satisfaction that he could deny it.

Bellamy filled his lungs; he had to be heard clearly by everyone in the room. “Marry us,” he called out, looking straight at Chancellor Griffin. The crowd fell silent. Bellamy kept right on talking. “Right now. In front of all these witnesses. As her husband I have all the fucking status I need.”

“We haven’t finished…” Yeflin tried to regain control.

Bellamy cut Yeflin off. “No. No more negotiations. You get Echo back, you lose no warriors in battle this summer, I claim my son as my own, and you get me. That’s it.”

“You will pledge your life to the Azgeda, Bellamy Blake?” Indra called out.

He looked straight at her. “As long as Echo lives, I pledge to the Azgeda.”

Indra gave him a short, tight nod, her eyes filled with more sympathy than Bellamy had expected. It almost broke him. He looked back at Yeflin instead.

Yeflin smiled tightly, promises of retribution at a later date swimming in his dark eyes. “I accept your pledge, Bellamy Blake.”

“And my sister Octavia Blake and her betrothed, Lincoln, will travel with us. See us safely to our new home and through the birth of our son.”

Yeflin’s smile dimmed. “I’m…”

Luna kom Flokru spoke for the first time. “It is a reasonable request, Yeflin.”

Yeflin looked around, but saw no support in Lexa and Indra’s grim expressions.

“Agrreed,” he said, not at all graciously. “But only those two, and only until the child is born.”

Kane banged his gavel on the podium. “Done.”

Yeflin looked startled, almost as if he’d forgotten Kane and the Arkers were even still in the room. He looked at Kane and the Chancellor. “We must speak, finalize our preparations and agreements…”

Kane cut him off. “The wedding will take place now. In front of all of these witnesses. Sealing our agreements here and now, in the open, with no chance for later misunderstanding. Today will mark the beginning of a one-year ceasefire between all Coalition clans and the people of Mount
Weather. This marriage between Bellamy Blake and Echo kom Azgeda is acknowledged by all parties as real and binding. Bellamy is recognized as the father of Echo’s child. And he pledges his life to the Azgeda as long as Echo shall live.”

He looked to Lexa, Luna and Indra. “Commander? Heda? Indra? What say you?”

Lexa looked to the other two women, then back to Kane. “We accept and acknowledge this marriage and these agreements, Marcus Kane kom Skaikru,” she said. “We will see it done.”

“Bellamy? Echo?” Kane called. “Come up to the front of the room, please.”
Bellamy caught himself staring at his hand again, the strange, heavy weight of Jake Griffin’s wedding band a seductive distraction in the face of the barely ordered diplomacy swirling around them.

He looked up when he felt someone watching him. Echo raised her hand to mirror his. Her matching ring, still warm from the Chancellor’s skin when he slid it on Echo’s finger, glinted in the afternoon sun spilling through the high windows. “It feels odd,” she said.

“Yeah,” he shook himself out. “It does. Heavier than it ought to be.”

“I want…” she began, her back straight and her shoulders square.

“No,” he interrupted her. “No apologies, no thanks. We’re in this together. We have been since the beginning and we were crazy to think anything else.”

She nodded, her eyes glassy with tears he knew she wouldn’t let fall. “Promise me you’ll save him,” she said, “No matter what it takes.”

“No.” He shook his head at her, reaching up to brush her hair back from her cheek, combing his fingers through the soft strands as he murmured, “No martyrdom on my watch. It’s not allowed.”

She half laughed, half frowned at him, startled out of herself and obviously wondering what the hell he’d been smoking. He wasn’t sure either. He was operating on nothing but instinct right now. He leaned closer to kiss her before he pulled reluctantly away. “I have to speak to the chancellor.”

The ceremony itself had been fast and simple. The grounders’ marriage ritual was nearly the same as the one they used on the Ark, as the ones they had all inherited from the Before Times. Public vows and an exchange of tokens equaled a formally recognized and legally binding marriage.

Bellamy and Echo had stared helplessly at each other when the question of what their vows would be was put to them.

Marriage wasn’t the beginning for most grounders, he knew. Or really, for any as far as he could tell. In fact most couples never took the last step toward a formal marriage, even couples who spent a lifetime together raising children in a combined household. These couples tended to hover indefinitely in a committed status they called ‘partnered’. If they even bothered to call it anything at all. Marriage, when and if it came, was about naming and claiming; children, property, clan membership, family assistance, inheritance, status, place. Political alliances.

But Bellamy had been raised on the Ark. They had no property to pass on. Children were provided for regardless of the relationship between biological parents and their personal commitments. Marriage, when it happened, was only and always about a public declaration of love and faithfulness.

To him, it didn’t feel like a marriage without at least some element of that.

Kane had coughed, in his quiet, ‘I’m about to tell you what to do and you should listen’ way, and said, “perhaps a version of our traditional vow would appeal to you both. It’s short and simple. The question is put to each of you,” his glance shifted between them as he studied their reactions, “Will you promise to love, comfort, honor and keep each other, in sickness and in health, for as long as you both shall live?”
Echo had smiled in relief. “Yes. I can do that. I like that.”

Bellamy had nodded, finding his throat too full for words.

The tokens had been the next challenge. Because marriage was not expected or required for clan members, when it happened the tokens had often been in preparation for some time. They had become quite elaborate as a result. Engraved knives, complex tattoos or scarifications, hand-tooled leather goods, heavily decorated clothing … or jewelry. The custom of rings had not quite died out. Once Yeflin mentioned that, almost as an aside, while they all stood about racking their brains for something significant enough to mark the moment, Abby Griffin had immediately offered up hers, reaching for the clasp of the necklace that she wore and refusing to listen to any objections.

Bellamy had protested vigorously, of course. But she assured him that Jake Griffin would be pleased to know their rings were being used again and in a good cause. When Bellamy suggested that Clarke wouldn’t be happy about it, might want to use the rings herself one day, Abby had just looked at him for a long moment, before saying, “Clarke will approve.”

And that was that. He was married.

Bellamy hadn’t imagined marriage for himself in a long, long time. Not since he quit caring who his own father had been, or who Octavia’s father was. He could have found out at any time, for himself at any rate. The Ark had complete biological records for every resident, living or dead. A simple blood test would have told him, and could have been performed upon request as soon as he turned fifteen. Not yet an adult, but plenty old enough to know if you wanted to. He had decided it didn’t matter. Either the man was dead, or he didn’t care about Aurora and her son. Neither option would have improved Bellamy’s life.

Before then, when he was a child, he had imagined getting married one day. Imagined having a family of his own. He’d been so sure that he would do everything differently, better, than Aurora had.

Of all the scenarios he’d imagined, though, this couldn’t be further from any of them. A vow to love, comfort and honor a woman he had known for barely longer than it had taken to knock her up. A woman whose life expectancy – away from the Mountain and Abby Griffin’s care and without a miracle – could now be measured in the fast dwindling weeks of that same pregnancy.

Which meant he better get started on securing a fucking miracle.

As soon as the brief marriage ceremony was complete, the Chancellor had immediately called Lexa and the rest into a huddle to conclude their one-year ceasefire agreement. Whatever the more ambitious factions within each group might feel, Bellamy gathered that all the clan leaders present believed that the majority of their people would welcome a summer and a winter without inter-clan fighting, whatever the reason. Yeflin obviously resented the shit out of having to make the deal. But he also seemed to recognize that at this point, his best option as his Queen’s representative was a gracious accommodation to the new status quo.

Bellamy hovered, trying not to appear as impatient as he felt. Finally the Chancellor stepped back and Kane sent a runner off to bring him a computer. Bellamy caught Abby Griffin’s eye. “Could I speak to you?” he asked quietly.

She nodded, “Of course.”

He gestured for her to move further from the crowd. “You said that you thought a caesarian birth was something the Azgeda healers could do if they wanted to?” he asked, and even he could hear
“Yes, but…”

“I know they won’t. But that means it’s possible for any healer to perform the surgery, right? No specialization necessary? Nia might let Octavia and Lincoln try, if I can convince her to sanction it. You’d have to teach them what to do, before we leave. We should have a day or two.”

After a short burst of startled laughter, the Chancellor said, “Are you serious?”

He assured her he was. She narrowed her eyes, considering. Then she nodded decisively. “Okay.”

Octavia, once she and Lincoln were finally released from their duties as translators, had a meltdown, of course. Bellamy figured he could let her have that, having sprung so much on her at once.

When she finally ran out of steam, Bellamy said, “I didn’t plan it, O. It was just the best option we had. Yeflin was going to push for some major payout to agree to the ceasefire. Echo offering up herself prevented that, because he’d been such an ass about her status. But I can’t let her go alone. And I’m not prepared to just give up on saving her life.”

“I’m not either,” Abby Griffin appeared behind him, Lincoln at her heels. He hadn’t expected to be interrupted, and they nearly scared the shit out of him as he stood with Octavia, half-hidden in an alcove in the main entrance hallway. Shielded, ironically enough, behind the Picasso sculpture of the pregnant woman. Octavia hadn’t been able to restrain herself long enough to get anywhere more private before she started in on him. Dr. Griffin continued, “I was trying to run the odds on triggering a premature birth, but that has too many potential complications. Including Yeflin pulling back out of the ceasefire. This is better. You and Lincoln can do this, Octavia.”

“I don’t know, Dr. Griffin…” Octavia began, but the chancellor cut her off.

“You’ve actually seen this done, remember? I talked through the whole thing, for Clarke, for Kavan, but also for you. The more people who know the technique, the better. Which is all to the good now.”

“Dr. Griffin already explained some of it to me,” Lincoln said, his attention focused wholly on Octavia. “I agree. It’s not ideal, but I think we can do this, Octavia. If Bellamy can secure the Queen’s approval.”

“You guys are always telling me I’m good at persuasion. I’ve never had a better cause.”

Octavia looked back and forth between Lincoln and Dr. Griffin. “You really think I can do this?” she asked.

They responded nearly in unison, assuring her they did.

“I wish Clarke were here,” Octavia said. “This is really more her thing than mine.”

There was an awkward silence, everyone looking anywhere than at Bellamy.

“I wish she were, too,” he said quietly. And he did. Fervently. Even though he had no idea what he could say to her. But trying to pretend he didn’t care, or that he didn’t hate the way their connection was fraying further by the week, seemed pathetic at this point. “But she’s not.”

“Right,” Dr. Griffin cleared her throat. “Yeflin announced he wants to leave day after tomorrow,
which means it’s time for a crash course in emergency surgery and labor complications. The two of you,” she pointed at Lincoln and Octavia, “Come with me.”

Octavia stepped into Bellamy’s arms and hugged him tight. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I know I freaked. I’m glad I’ll be coming with you, big brother,” then she turned and strode off after Lincoln and Dr. Griffin.

Bellamy retreated further into the alcove, until, his back against the wall, he sank slowly to the floor. With whatever combination of adrenaline and willpower he’d been running on finally exhausted, his legs just…gave way. His hands, when he raised them, were not quite steady. Or his vision was suddenly blurry. Not that it mattered. He felt utterly drained.

The ring on his finger caught his attention again. It was a surprisingly good fit. Jake Griffin must have had big hands, too. The Chancellor’s ring was a shade too small for Echo, she’d followed Raven off a while back because Raven swore she could fix that easily.

He was married. To Echo. Sworn to the Azgeda. As long as Echo lived. Formally recognized as the father of her child. Also too, the actual father of her child. Their child. Who might not survive his birth if Bellamy couldn’t hold everything together long enough. Hold himself together long enough.

Simple, really, he assured himself. Just a series of tasks. Some of them already checked off.

Stop nuclear war (for this summer at least). Check.

Marry Echo. Check.

Swear to the Azgeda. In progress. (Final oath would be to Nia herself.)

Leave the Mountain, his people, the guard, the rangers, the delinquents, Clarke, all of them behind. For as long as Echo lived.

Travel to the Ice Nation.

Keep Echo from going into labor on the road.

Convince Nia to let him, Octavia and Lincoln assist Echo during labor.

Perform clandestine caesarian section.

Deliver son.

Successfully halt uterine bleeding.

Live with the Azgeda with wife and son until next crisis.

Somewhere in the middle of making this list, laughter started to choke out no matter how much Bellamy tried to smother it.

Stopping (delaying?) nuclear destruction had turned out to be the easiest thing on it.

God Damn Fucking Earth.

On the Ark, he’d never understood black comedy. Never thought it was funny.

Now he couldn’t stop laughing.
“Are you sure that you want to see this?” Abby looked at Roan. “I mean, it doesn’t look quite like it did before. The cages were so disturbing, just knowing that they were here was horrifying. We took them down right away.”

“Thank you. I understand. But I’d like to see it.”

Abby nodded and shouldered open the door. As a result of disuse, it had developed a remarkably appropriate grinding squeak. Then she moved back and allowed Roan to step into the space where the Mountain Men had held their victims. His people.

He walked slowly into the center and looked up. The chains still hanging from the pulleys above were caught into bundles that resembled odd, half-formed stalactites. The floor was stained, the trails of blood and urine and feces twisting their way into the drains worn deep and stubborn, sunk far beyond a few attempts at bleaching them away.

Abby watched him and wondered who or what he saw.

Roan was turning out to be just as fascinating as all the stories about him had led her to expect. He had arrived at the mountain barely more than an hour ago. Hustled with Clarke and her men into a jeep and driven straight to the plateau as soon as they reached the northern border post.

He was not the giant of a man Abby had been somehow anticipating. In fact he really was fairly unremarkable physically, in a generally handsome sort of way. He was just a fraction taller than Marcus, tanned, lean and dangerous-looking as most of the men of the clans tended to be. His brown hair was long and unbraided, hiding much of the tattoo that crawled up from his shirt collar to his jawline. His hands were strong, scarred and calloused. His eyes were blue, his profile all prominent angles and his cheeks covered with a short wild beard. His clothes were simpler than of those of the Trikru she’d met, less covered in decoration or extraneous bits of buckle or fur.

He’d had a machete and a bow and quiver on his back and a long knife at his hip, and probably other knives that Abby hadn’t seen. A small, unstrung pistol-grip crossbow was securely fastened across the pack he had dropped at his feet when they arrived. His weapons were in the hands of the Guard now, but she didn’t make the mistake of assuming he was any less lethal without them.

She told herself that the faint glamour that clung to him was from expectations, nothing more. She didn’t find herself to be very convincing.

Abby and Kane had met Clarke and her guards and guides at the main door, still uncertain about whether or not to allow Roan into the fortress. The stories about the man were legion, taking on aura of myth leavened with the bitter tang of envious gossip. It was clear enough that selling information was one of the things he specialized in, however.

“Clarke!” Abby had sighed in relief as she wrapped her arms around her daughter. “I’m so glad you’re home.”

“Me too,” Clarke had replied, her answering hug strong and solid. “I’m so sorry we’re late. It just got way more involved than I expected.” Once she had let go of Abby, she looked over at the fourth man in her party. “Once Roan agreed to show us the resources he’d already identified, it was too good an opportunity to pass up.”

“Mom,” Clarke had continued, indicating the man with her chin, “Meet Roan.”
Roan had promptly stepped forward and held out his hand, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Chancellor Griffin.”

Abby had smiled back, startled enough by Roan’s easy confidence, by his warm, solid grip, his casual familiarity with Arker norms, that she had actually cast a wild glance at her daughter. Who had just shrugged and rolled her eyes very briefly, indicating that she hadn’t taught him what to do.

“Your daughter has told me so much about you,” he’d added, his gaze direct and sincere.

“I trust it was all flattering,” she’d replied, telling her heart to slow the fuck down.

“Of course.” His voice had softened, persuasive and intimate, and he drifted closer for emphasis, as though he was sharing an excellent secret, “Your daughter is very proud of you.”

Clarke, who had appeared to be blushing faintly, had coughed then and changed the subject. “Colonel Miller met us at the northern border post, threw us in a jeep and rushed us back here. What’s going on?”

After a confusing silence that no one knew quite how to break, Kane had dismissed Beale and Macton to debrief with Colonel Miller, claimed Clarke and Duncan for himself, and left Roan to Abby.

Clarke had said, over her shoulder as Kane was leading her away, “I promised Roan a tour of the mountain, mom. He wants to see it all.”

So here they were, responding to Roan’s first request, which had been, “Where did they keep my people, Dr. Griffin? I’d like to see it, if I could.”

Now he turned to look at the bolt holes and rust marks in the floor, left behind when they’d removed the machinery after claiming the mountain for the Ark. “How did they do it? Use my people to filter and clean their blood for them?”

Abby blinked a little in surprise. “You understand that’s what they were doing?”

“We’ve covered quite a bit of territory in the last six weeks. Plenty of time to talk. I asked Clarke a lot of questions.”

His easy familiarity with her daughter’s first name pricked at her ears.

“They also took their blood, of course, as they filtered their own through their captives’ bodies,” she informed him, her tone more abrupt than she wished. Even now it was impossible to not shiver in revulsion, or feel the dull ache in her own hip.

“Of course,” he nodded at her, his gaze sharp. She wondered if he knew what the Mountain Men had tried to do to her. Before her daughter killed them all. Then he looked back at the stained floor, tracing some of the stains with the toe of his boot. “Vampires. Just like the ones in the old stories, they couldn’t bear the light of day.”

Abby took a deep breath and began to explain, showing him where the machines had been, what they did, where the lines had passed through the walls. He nodded along and asked surprisingly cogent questions. She finally asked him if he trained as a healer, but he denied it, explaining, “My people are short of healers these days, so I’ve helped when I could, when no one else was available.”

Next she led him to the pleasant hospital ward where the Mountain Men had hooked themselves up
to their human filters and blood donors. Now it was just a recovery space for the mountain clinic, empty but for a heavily medicated Arker sleeping off a bad migraine under supervision.

“The mountain people each had a permanent, metal shunt embedded in their chests, just above their hearts. Here,” Abby explained, touching the spot on her own breast, “one valve in for cleaned blood, and one valve out for the fouled. They put the shunts in after puberty. Young children seem to have been more resilient.”

“It must have hurt them,” Roan observed, staring at the beds.

“A great deal,” Abby agreed, “At least judging by their use of painkillers.”

He raised his brow, his expression darkly sardonic. “Their kaf?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I hope it hurt them all of the time.” He looked around once more before turning back to Abby. “And the Cerberus program? Where did they turn my people into monsters?”

“That we have changed, completely. It’s a bar, now. A place for recreation.”

“I know,” he said, “Clarke told me. I’d still like to see it.”

The bar was quiet this time of the afternoon, a few folks who worked odd shifts in for a quiet drink or a light meal before the main mess re-opened for supper. The screens were still showing one of the Star Wars movies.

“My father was turned into reaper when I was small,” he said, staring up at one of the screens. “I don’t know what he would have thought of this, but,” he looked at Abby, a faint smile hovering around his mouth, “I think my mother would have approved.”

“I’m glad.” And she was. The men who’d recovered from the Red, from their mistreatment, and who had visited the bar, had all seemed to take at least some interest in the irony. She was pleased that a son could feel it too.

“So,” he said, looking at her once again, “What treasures did the Mountain Men keep for themselves, out of the hands of the savages that roamed the earth?”

“So much,” Abby said, hearing a lifetime’s worth of bitterness in his words. “But we’re close to the library so let’s start there?”

Roan was quiet even longer in the library than he had been down in the bar. He walked down a few short rows, his fingers just brushing the spines of the books held there, his touch almost but not quite reverent.

Finally he said, to the books as much as to Abby, “You know, fifty years ago, they could have just asked for our help. There were still some elders alive then, who remembered the Before Times. The Trigedakru, all of the clans, we were growing, setting up new farming villages as our populations finally began to recover. There is so much here we could have used, knowledge, tools, skills we would have willingly traded blood or tissue or bone marrow for, or donated eggs or sperm if they’d wanted to try breeding their way out.” He looked at Abby then, and lifted his lips into a small, wolfish smile. “I won’t tell you we were entirely peaceful, because we weren’t. But we weren’t killers first, farmers second, the way we are now. We were focused on growing, not fighting for our lives.”
“There is no record of them ever considering that approach,” Abby told him. “At least, not formally. There were always those among them who protested, even refused to use stolen genetic material. But….” she trailed off.

“But they died for their purity of heart.”

“Yes. And in the meantime, those inside the Mountain grew steadily weaker. They never really had a population large enough to create a healthy, sustainable colony. Five hundred adults, evenly balanced between men and women is what most geneticists believed was a bare minimum to establish a sustainable, growing human colony. We were very, very lucky on the Ark. We started with four hundred, but our populations were evenly balanced by sex and young enough, and from enough different places around the world, to create a vibrant and sustainable genetic diversity out of a smaller pool. Here, there were even fewer and they were less diverse, genetically speaking. They couldn’t create a sustainable population, and they actually grew weaker over time.”

“They sheltered the rich and the powerful first, I assume, when the Cataclysm came? Men and women too old to breed healthy children?”

“Yes,” she acknowledged his cynicism with a short nod, “The next generations were largely descendants of their favored employees.”

“I’m glad your daughter killed them all. Though,” he caught her eye, “I would have been even happier to do it for her, saved her needless emotional despair.”

Abby realized he was absolutely serious, and wondered just how many heart-to-heart talks Clarke had shared with this stranger. Who was, perhaps, not so strange to her at all. “I wish you could have, too,” she said.

“She never told you about me, did she? About our meeting last autumn?”

“No.” Abby was surprised to discover that she was not surprised. Clarke had always been good with secrets. Earth had simply given her greater cause and greater need.

“I met Clarke just outside your Camp Jaha. I had been far away to the south and west, and on foot, when I got word of new people falling from the sky in great numbers, of a new alliance to attack Mount Weather. I rushed back but was too late to see or do much. Lexa’s forces were already in full retreat. I was trying to learn more when I spotted a surviving Mountain soldier, alone in the woods. Without his protective suit. I followed him. He was tracking Clarke. Eventually I introduced myself.”

“By shooting Carl Emerson in the head,” Clarke’s dry voice made Abby nearly jump out of her skin.

“What?” Abby exclaimed, snapping her head around to see Clarke standing behind them.

“Yeah,” Clarke said, with a low, humorless chuckle. “I woke up to find Emerson holding a gun on me. Roan killed him before he could pull the trigger.”

Abby was aghast, “Why didn’t you tell us this before?”

“I didn’t really want to talk about that first month. Or the debt I owed Roan.”

“That particular debt is now paid in full, Goat,” he said, smiling faintly at her daughter, in a way that made Abby’s senses vibrate even harder. There was far too much familiarity here for merely a guide and a fellow traveler. Though, it wasn’t particularly flirtatious either. It was… friendly?
Brotherly? Did it remind her of the way Bellamy looked at Octavia? Not really?

“Yeah. That one,” Clarke replied, with a scowl and a heavy and faintly resentful stress on ‘one.’ “And the more times you call me Goat, the smaller the rest of my debt gets. Just remember that.” She turned to Abby, “Kane told me what’s been happening.”

Clarke’s face was a mask, smooth and cool. Only her burning eyes giving any hint of her emotions. The same face she’d worn when she turned her back on Wells Jaha, blaming him and herself for Jake’s death. The same face she’d worn when she turned down Abby’s offer of Finn Collins’s ashes. Ashes Abby still had saved, against the day Clarke would finally be ready to deal with that tragedy. The face she’d worn when she walked out of Mt. Weather after irradiating the entire population there. Tragedies stacking up so thick and deep, Abby was beginning to fear Clarke would never get out from under them. Never find herself again.

“I’d like Kane to meet Roan, get whatever input Roan might like to offer. After that,” Clarke looked over and pinned Roan with a sharp, blue glare, “I want to make a new deal.”

“For what?” Abby and Roan asked almost in the same breath.

Clarke squared her shoulders and thrust out her chin. Her voice only shook a little, too faint for Abby to decide which emotions Clarke was suppressing. “I want your help to sneak into the Ice Nation, so I can help Octavia save Echo and the baby.”

All of them, Abby decided. Clarke was suppressing all of the emotions.
Decisions and choices

Her mom ushered Roan into Kane’s office, then stopped Clarke from following him in with a hand on her arm and a raised brow. Abby pulled the door securely closed, with Roan and Kane on the inside, and Clarke still outside in the hall with her.

“We need to talk,” Abby said.

Clarke heard it as though she had said it in all caps. TALK.

T-A-L-K.

A Talk of Doom.

Her mom had that earnest, worried glint in her eye that suggested she was about to try and push Clarke to ‘open up about her feelings.’ To ‘take time to take care of herself.’ To ‘let herself respond to’ the latest whatever-the-hell-it-was that prevented them from just living their fucking lives. Clarke was absolutely sure that somewhere Abby had a hidden manual on ‘talking with teen daughters in the midst of the breakdown of all civilization.’ Once she found it, she was going to ritually burn it. Someday. When she had time to track it down.

“Mom,” Clarke said, and despite knowing that she had kept her tone brisk and business-like and dismissive, she heard it as the internalized whine it was. ‘Moooooooooom!!!’

Her mom heard it that way too.

“I know. You hate talking about your feelings. Especially with me.”

“So why ask?” Clarke snapped.

“Because I hate talking about mine, but your dad used to badger me until I did, and in the process I usually discovered things I needed to know.”

Clarke’s whole headspace momentarily fritzed into a blank white screen before she managed to say, “That was low.”

“I have a feeling we don’t have a lot of time to waste, dancing around and saying nothing,” said her mom. The Chancellor.

Clarke gave in, not very graciously, and followed Abby to her office. Abby had decorated it in the months since the Arkers moved in to the mountain fortress, covering the walls in beautifully framed nineteenth century American prints of plant and animal studies that had once been housed in the Smithsonian. It wasn’t the same as a window to the world, but the prints and the live plants on stands in the corners were a pleasant reminder that they were on the ground at last.

“Would you like a cup of tea?” her mom asked. “I’m going to make some for myself.”

Clarke knew this was because Abby liked to have something to do with her hands. She plopped down on the sofa against the wall and said, “Sure, mom. Whatever you’re having is fine.”

Abby nodded, and with her eyes firmly on the electric kettle on her credenza, she said, “Why do you want to go after Bellamy?”

Clarke opened her mouth and the words tumbled out. “Because he would come for me.”
She almost heard the last tumbler slot into place in her chest as she spoke, her words firm and satisfying as she locked her conviction down. She would follow Bellamy into danger and she would see him safe or die trying.

Her heartbeat actually slowed, all her restless anxiety since she’d seen Colonel Miller’s worried face at the northern border station a few hours ago just… slipping away.

Her mom looked at her then, her gaze calm and measuring. ‘Doctor mode,’ Clarke always thought of it. She’d never really liked it when she saw that thoughtful gaze directed at her. Because her mom was a damn fine doctor and very little escaped her when she was thinking with that part of herself. She must have heard the same certainty Clarke did.

“I see,” was all Abby said. “Did he ask you to follow him?”

“You know he left me a message?” Clarke snarled, immediately bristling that her mom and Kane were spying on her again.

“Yes. Bellamy used my office computer to leave personal messages for several people, right before they left. He mentioned you specifically.”

“Oh.” Clarke felt mildly deflated. She met her mom’s eyes. “He didn’t ask me to follow.” She raised her chin, “But he didn’t ask me not to, either.”

After Kane dismissed her and before tracking her mom and Roan down in the library, she’d stopped to check her email. Hoping and fearing that Bellamy had left her a message. He had. So had his sister.

His vid was short, his head so fully in the frame that she hadn’t realized until now that he must have been sitting at her mom’s desk. The gilt edge of a frame had been visible just behind one shoulder.

“I figure you must have already heard the basics by now. I’m going north, with Echo. I have a plan to save her, not a very good one, but the best I can come up with until we get there and I can see the lay of the ground better. I wish we could have talked before I left. So I could tell you in person.” He paused and licked his lips, an unconscious, nervous tic she’d often noticed before. “I’m sorry, Clarke. This isn’t how I thought it would go. Isn’t how I hoped it would go. But with everything happening, Echo and the baby, ALIE and Jaha’s warheads….” he paused again, shrugging his shoulder. “Anyway. Take care of yourself, Clarke.” His smile was strained, but genuine. He raised two fingers to his brow and waved a rough salute. “Until we meet again.”

Octavia’s message had been shorter. She had recorded it at one of the terminals in the library. Clarke could see the open stacks behind her. Octavia had been glaring fiercely right into the camera, her voice rough and angry and pleading all at once.

“You’re late. You should have been here, Clarke. I saw Yeflin’s face. He wants Echo and the baby to die, and then he’s going to kill Bell for calling him out in public like that. He’s not going to let him leave Azgeda Territory alive. Lincoln and I are going to do everything we can, but I’m afraid we won’t be able to pull it off alone. If we’re going to save any of them, if we’re going to save Bellamy, you have to follow us, Clarke. We need you. He needs you. I need you. Fix this.”

Clarke fully intended to do everything in her power to save all of them. Including Lincoln and Octavia.

Abby handed Clarke a mug of steaming tea. “And you think Roan can get you there?”
“Yes. And out again. If he wants too.”

“You have a lot of faith in him.”

“He’s saved my life three times. That I know of.”

“Oh.” Her mom looked impressed.

Clarke hastened to shut her down. “That wouldn’t keep him from killing me if he decided he needed to.”

“Why didn’t you tell us about him before?”

“It was too complicated. And mostly I wanted to forget I’d ever met him.”

“And now?”

“Now I trust him to take me where I want to go.”

“And you also like him?”

“Like is the wrong word for a person like him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Of course I like him. But,” Clarke shook her head, trying to explain. “It doesn’t matter if I like him or not?” She made it a question, even though it wasn’t. Or, wasn’t one anyone had asked. Yet. “He is who he is with or without me.”

“Are you two involved?”

“Is that a serious question?” Clarke couldn’t help but feel faintly horrified. By the prospect of being involved with Roan. And by having her mother ask her about it.

“Clarke, he made no secret of how well he knows you, and you’ve shared so much with him about our people, about our history, about the mountain…”

“No. We aren’t having sex.” A long time ago, and far, far away, they had. But that was a different story about different people from a different place. About a woman and a man alone in the wilderness by the light of a fire on a starlit night. It had nothing to do with the present.

In the present, he hadn’t tossed off a single lewd comment or cast a single lecherous glance in her direction since the day she’d met his daughter, since the day he realized his much younger sister wanted her for herself.

Clarke knew, without them ever having to discuss it, that Roan had stopped seeing her as a woman that day, and had started to see her as a girl instead. He’d flipped a lever in his head and she went from the box marked have sex with into the box marked never, ever have sex with again. Most of the time she was grateful. A very little, teeny-tiny bit of the time, usually just after she caught an exceedingly rare glimpse of him with his shirt off, muscles rippling under his decoratively inked skin, she resented it like hell.

She was a healthy eighteen-year-old, after all! She was running around with the best, strongest, fittest, leanest body of her life. A body that wanted so much more appreciation than it was getting. Instead she’d been travelling the wilderness with four men in their prime, who had all decided – probably collectively, and possibly because Roan gave them no other option – to treat her as some
sort of younger sibling or second-in-training. Not that she wanted to have sex with any of them. She did not! She just felt it would be a whole hell of a lot more flattering if it appeared to at least be an appealing, if abstract, concept.

“Do you think he’ll agree to take you?” her mom the Chancellor asked, calling her back to the subject at hand and apparently willing to take Clarke’s denial at face value. “It has to be dangerous for him as well, right?”

“For the right price, he’d do just about anything. If he thinks it would be worth his time for his own reasons, he’ll be more willing to be bargained down to something realistic,” Clarke said.

“Would he be able to keep you safe?”

“Safer than just about anyone else could.” Clarke looked up, hearing something in the tone of her mom’s voice. “Are you really thinking of letting me go?”

“I think you’ll go after Bellamy whether I give you permission or not, so I’d rather you go with a guide and a guard.” Her mom’s tone was very, very dry. A lot of history, not all of it worth revisiting, was buried in that tone.

“Huh,” was all Clarke said.

“So, where have you been the last two months?” her mom asked.

“Looking at the resources available for making ammunition, old school gunpowder and modern propellants, both.”

“He was willing to show you?”

“I think he wanted to check on them anyway, to be honest. This just got him credit with us for something he was already planning to do. It also lets us, lets the Ark, know that at least some people in the clans are ready to modernize. Have been getting ready to modernize for some time.”

“How so?” Her mom the Chancellor was back now. All serious business. Clarke was relieved to be back on solid ground, making her report, leaving her private life private, where it belonged.

“Take the pharmacies and herbalists. I thought it would be all bunches of drying herbs hanging from beams, iron pots over fires, incantations, witchcraft stuff.”

“It’s not, I take it?”

“No. It’s rough around the edges and relies on a lot of patched and repaired equipment, but the best and largest operators work in big rooms with tall windows, steel-topped tables, gas fires, running water, and all the regular lab equipment we had on the Ark – beakers, tubes, flasks, burettes, pipettes, valves, syringes, foot powered centrifuges – it was pretty damn impressive.”

“Are they making any gunpowder yet?”

“No. But they could start tomorrow, or as soon as they have the raw materials.”

“And more modern propellants?”

“That will be harder because it takes way more chemistry, but again, if they had the raw materials and instructions, then, yeah. I think they can start making the stuff. And the metal dealers do stock old copper. They have smelters, rollers and pressing machines. All of it adapted back to mechanical
rather than electrical power. It’s how they make all their swords and battleaxes. Shell casings aren’t going to be a problem for them.”

“Roan showed you where to find the raw materials? Could we pull from the same places?”

“More or less. Coal in the southwest, or straight across the river if we can trust the old deep mines in West Virginia. Salt mines in both Pennsylvania and southwestern Virginia. Limestone lots of places, depending on what you want to do with it. And sure, with treaties in place, we can mine those places. Though Raven is going to have a shit fit when she sees how much work it’s going to be to reopen the shafts.” She shared a quick, understanding smile with her mom. “It will be a lot of effort, and there are about a hundred steps in the processing itself, but yeah. We can make it, and so can they.”

Roan understood the steps. He’d explained them all in mind-numbing detail at one point, when she’d made the mistake of asking. Which was when she finally guessed that he’d already learned to make it himself. He acknowledged her charge with a laugh, and confided that he’d burned his eyebrows off in an early misfire, before he’d learned to be cautious. And to make himself a pair of safety goggles. Which was an image that helped on the hardest of nights, after she’d accidentally seen him bathing in a river.

Clarke squared her shoulders. “There is some bad news, though. Especially in light of the whole ALIE situation.” She knew Kane would be talking to her mom about it later, but figured she might as well fill her in now.

“What?”

“A week ago, in central Pennsylvania, we found solid evidence that the Azgeda have begun actively mining limestone. And they aren’t cutting it for building materials. They’re grinding it down at the quarry for its chemical components, calcium carbonate mostly. Basic ingredients for all kinds of industrial chemical processes. Including propellants for ammunition. The quantity they took seems fairly small still, the miners had come and gone, but the pits were fresh. And it’s just one old mine of many inside their territory.”

Since then, Roan had sat by their small campfires late into the night, speaking urgently to Duncan, his head bent close and his words too low and fast for Clarke to make out much of the Trigedasleng. But from what she could understand, it was clan politics all the way. In the daylight he rode in grim silence, his face lined with worry as he pushed their little band hard and fast to cover as much ground as they could as they made their way back to Mt. Weather.

“On the other hand,” Clarke concluded, “I have a feeling Roan is itching to get up there to investigate what they’re up to himself. Which ought to make it easier to make a deal for him to take me to Bellamy.”
Another day, another deal

As usual, Clarke was mostly right. Roan was amenable to hiring on as her guide and guard again. But he was also surprisingly adamant that he make the deal not with her directly, but with the Chancellor, and with the full support and approval of Marcus Kane.

He wanted it to be very clear he was working for the Mountain, for the Ark, and not merely for Clarke.

She complained, of course, but he looked her straight in the eye and said, “You’re the one who is always insisting that you have no formal authority or responsibilities for your people. Wanheda.” She spluttered.

He kept talking. “It’s not fair to your leader, or to the Skaikru, for you to run out and get into trouble without her knowledge. Because your people, all of them, will all be held to account for your actions anyway.”

Of course, he’d also figured out that her mom was the only one who could authorize the payments he wanted, so he preferred to deal directly with her. The first thing he requested was easy enough for the Chancellor to grant. He wanted guns for himself and for Duncan, who was apparently going with them. Clarke realized that she had entirely lost track of who Duncan was working for these days, herself or Roan. And as soon as she asked herself the question, she realized that she also knew the answer. Duncan was riding with Roan now, through some mysterious alchemy that she could only attribute to their obviously complicated Trigedakru childhoods.

As for the second item on his list, Roan wished to bring his daughter to the Mountain to be educated, trained by Ark teachers as they would one of their own children. Which Abby also readily granted, observing privately to Clarke that such a situation could be so mutually beneficial that it almost seemed like cheating.

“Will Budeka be okay with that?” Clarke asked him, once she heard about this plan.

He looked at her and raised his brows. “What do you mean?”

“How will she feel about leaving Polis, leaving Lexa? Moving to a new place full of new people?”

He thought for a minute, then he said, “She’s almost old enough to be made a second, so her time with Lexa is nearly done. This is merely another kind of service to her people. Instead of serving as second to one teacher, at the mountain among you Skaikru she will have many teachers who can introduce her to things she would never learn if she stayed among our people.”

“She’s just thirteen!”

“We were dying, under the heel of the Mountain. We haven’t had the luxury of allowing our children to grow up slowly. She will do her duty.”

“And like it, I suppose?” Clarke glowered at him.

“Ah,” he said, understanding apparently dawning on him. “Actually, yes, I hope? She is an intelligent and curious person. But she is not instinctively a warrior. If she’s here, she won’t be made second to someone who doesn’t appreciate her strengths. Or doesn’t like me. Or didn’t like her mother.”
He made an incredulous face at her. “Why are you surprised? Have you been paying attention to us at all?”

She had no answer, he was swept off with Beale to get his guns, and Clarke went off to meet her mother in the clinic, where Abby was giving her a crash course in obstetrics and newborn care.

Clarke finally caught up with Roan again at supper in the mess the next evening. They were planning to leave for Polis at dawn. He intended them to make the trip in a day and a half of hard riding, taking full advantage of the long hours of daylight to cover the whole distance in less than half the normal time.

“Are you going to finish that?” Roan pointed at her still half-full plate with his fork.

“No,” Clarke pushed her plate towards him. “I took too much.” The commissary staff was outdoing themselves with all the first vegetables of spring and she’d wanted some of everything. “I’m too used to trail rations. I can’t eat any more without making myself sick.”

He pulled her plate across the table and started shoveling food in. Watching him, she shuddered. He’d already refilled his own plate twice. “I can’t believe you can still find room for all that without vomiting.”

He looked up at her and when he could speak, he said, “Food I didn’t have to catch, gather, or cook myself? Of course I can eat more.”

She grimaced. “You didn’t eat like that at your sister’s table.”

“At my sister’s table, I only eat from the dishes she eats from. And she eats like a sickly child.”

It took a second or two for the implications of his words to sink in. Once they did, Clarke gasped, “You think Lexa would poison you?”

“I think I’m alive because I’m careful.”

Which, she had to give him credit, could be very highly ranked on the ‘not answering the question in any way’ scale.

Raven, who’d been listening quietly to their exchange, raised her brows pointedly at Clarke. “Poisoning really does seem to be right in the Trikru comfort zone. And he obviously knows his sister better than you did.”

Clarke was a little horrified that Raven just shot that out, but Roan chuckled and Duncan, who had been sitting quietly to his left actually snorted audibly.

“Lexa is the current, temporal embodiment of the spirit of our people. She is who we are. That’s what it means, to hold the Commander’s Spirit,” Roan said.

“And poisoning is part of what it means to be Trikru?” Clarke raised her brow.

“A part of it. Along with betrayal, torture and murder. We can be very dangerous,” he looked around the table, catching the eyes of all Clarke’s friends who had joined them. “None of you should ever forget that.”

“That’s not all you are!” Clarke declared, indignant on someone’s behalf, though she wasn’t sure
“for whom, exactly. “You’re people, just like us. And we have plenty of bad shit on our hands.” She
glared around the table. “Or did you all just forget that I was actually put on trial for genocide?”

“Well, the vote was to decide if they should call a grand jury to investigate the charge, and the
proposal was voted down,” Wick said.

“Why would your people do that?” Roan exclaimed, his expression full of horrified contempt. “For
the Mountain Men? For them, they wanted some kind of justice?”

“No,” Clarke tried to explain, feeling somehow that it was imperative that Roan understand the
Akers, their dreams for the new world. “No. But, the history of earth is so full of horrible crimes.
We hoped, on the Ark, when we thought we were all that was left, that we humans could actually
learn from our mistakes. That we could be better, build a better world when we reached the ground
again.”

Roan narrowed his eyes. “What a huge disappointment we must all have been, those of us who
survived on the surface of the Earth.”

“No!” Clarke said, but unfortunately Raven said, “Yes!” at the same time.

Clarke tried to scowl her back into silence. “We were surprised that you were here, yes. But
everything about your culture makes complete sense, given the world you live in.” Roan’s glare
had actually intensified as she spoke, so she hastened to add, “That we all live in.”

“Nice deployment of the appeal-to-nature fallacy, goat. We are savage because we live in a savage
world, so we just can’t help ourselves, right?”

“Stop calling me goat.”

“Stop using bad philosophy to explain away the savagery of my people. Or your own. Wanheda.”

“I hate that name too!”

“You’ve earned both.”

“Whoa…” Wick said. “Getting a little real, people.”

Roan’s glance slid around the table, coming back to rest on Clarke. His temper changed again and
now she could tell he was laughing, on the inside. “I think your friends are worried that I don’t
respect you enough, Wanheda.”

“My friends,” she glowered around the table, “should mind their own damn business.”

She might as well have said nothing, because Raven jumped in with, “You should respect Clarke.
She kept us alive when your sister wanted us all to die.”

Roan acknowledged her with one of his regal nods. “I do respect Clarke,” he said. “I even like her
most of the time.”

“Well, that’s about as much of the time as I like you,” Clarke snapped.

“No. You like me better than that.”

“You are so full of it.”

“Am I?”
Clarke rolled her eyes, and then deliberately turned her shoulder on him to ask Raven a question about how her work on repairing the geosci monitors was going. After the meal she went back to studying with her mom, trying to ask every question about every childbirth disaster she could dream up while she still had access to an actual doctor.

Sitting back an hour or so later, scrubbing at her scalp in frustration at the sheer amount of material she was trying to power through, her mom asked her, “Do you really have to go east with Roan? Isn’t he planning to get his daughter and bring her back here, before you head north? Could you stay here and study while he does that?”

“He wants me there when he hits up Lexa for permission to take Budeka.”

“He really doesn’t seem like the kind of man who waits around for permission. Especially concerning the future of his own daughter.”

Clarke laughed because her mother’s assessment was so very on the nose. “Well, yes and no,” she tried to explain. “He actually respects his Heda, so he doesn’t want to piss her off more than he has to.”

Her mom sighed heavily.

Clarke shrugged, “But I could go ask him if I can stay here, and then he can pick me up on the way back?”
According to the guard officer on duty, Roan and Duncan had already gone to their temporary quarters. Clarke thanked the woman and a few minutes later she was knocking loudly on Roan’s door, certain she was probably waking him up from his self-induced food coma.

When the door finally wrenched open, she was confronted by an eye-popping display of Roan’s naked chest, all spiraling tattoos, kill scars and very well-defined abs. She dropped her eyes to the floor to discover that his bare feet were several shades lighter than the skin on his arms, and that he had tattoos there too. She wondered, for a distracted, fleeting second, why she didn’t remember that. Not that his feet had been her primary interest.

“Yes?” he said. “What do you need, Clarke?”

“I…,” Clarke mentally shook herself out and looked up at his face, trying not to be too distracted by the faintly knowing look in his eyes. “Right. Yes. Do I have to come with you to Polis? Can you do that without me, so I can stay here and study more with my mom? There is just so much more to I need to know…”

“Yes, you have to come to Polis. You need time to learn to look and act like someone born into the clans, and in Polis you can begin practicing.”

“Can’t Mari and Kavan show me whatever I need to know? I could really use the time…”

“No.” He cut her off abruptly. “It’s not as simple as putting on a costume. It’s your walk and your carriage and the way you hold your head. You can’t learn it here, surrounded by your own kind. This is not negotiable.”

“Hey! I thought you were the prince of ‘everything has a price’,,” Clarke said, “Let’s make a deal…”

“No,” he repeated, and stepped back, obviously preparing to close the door.

It suddenly dawned on Clarke that he hadn’t been alone when she knocked, that he’d pulled his trousers on so hastily that they were barely fastened and were hanging precariously off his hips, that his hair was more disheveled than usual and that his lips were unusually pink. God, did he work fast.

She put her hand out and caught the door, “Look, I realize I’m interrupting, but this is really important, okay? She can wait a few minutes, surely!”

“She?” Roan looked startled, then he huffed out a nearly silent laugh while stepping back and opening the door. “Fine. But I promise you I’m not going to change my mind.”

Clarke walked in, trying to suppress her sense of morbid curiosity about the identity of Roan’s partner and hoping that the poor woman wouldn’t be too embarrassed. A second later she realized it was not some strange woman who was going to be grappling with total mortification. She was.

Duncan Kom Trigedakru was sitting up in the bed, leaning up against a stack of pillows, his arm resting on his upraised knee, a corner of the sheet drawn politely across his obviously naked lap. His dark skin was almost glowing in the light of the lamps, and if he wasn’t as intensely muscular as Roan, he was healthy and strong. He was looking at Roan and shaking his head, his expression perhaps best defined as ‘mildly irritated amusement.’
The sound of Roan closing the door behind her startled her back into a desperate attempt to appear nonchalant. So she said, “You look really good, Duncan. I’m so glad to see you’ve made a full recovery.”

Which made both men blink, exchange wild glances and then start to snicker. For which she could hardly blame them. That had been an unbelievably idiotic thing to say. After a few seconds, Duncan gave in and tipped his head back against the wall, his shoulders shaking as he broke into the first belly laugh Clarke had ever heard from him. He actually had a really nice laugh, she thought, with the tiny part of her brain that was still functioning.

Roan meanwhile had dropped into one of the chairs at the small table. He kicked the other towards Clarke. “Sit down, goat, before you fall.”

She did, her glance darting back and forth between the two men still laughing at her. “How did I not know this,” she finally said, more to herself than to them.

“I have no idea,” Roan answered anyway. “We’ve been hunting together,” his stress on the word leaving no doubt as to his actual meaning, “since we reached the coal mines near Stone Gap.”

“But,” Clarke protested, hardly able to process that he was talking about something that happened a month and a half earlier, “you always came back with fresh game?”

“We still had to eat!” he said in his best ‘don’t be an idiot’ voice.

“And,” she said, paying no attention at all to this interruption, and feeling a vague sense of being terribly ill-used growing in her belly, “you asked me to kill him!”

Roan waved his hand, dismissing her complaint. “Is he dead?”

“No!” she said. “But,” and, with her feeling of ill-use mounting faster, “did you really ask me to do something you believed I couldn’t do? Just planning to keep me in your debt forever?”

Roan’s smile turned faintly wicked. “Yes. I proposed something I thought was mostly impossible. I knew Duncan had been lost in a fight with Reapers at the end of the previous winter. I thought… I hoped for his sake,” and he met Duncan’s eyes, the expression in his own dark and unreadable, “that he was already dead.”

He looked back at Clarke. “It was an impulse, but I’ve learned to trust my impulses. I was curious to know if you’d take the deal, and yes it kept you in my debt.”

“You’re an ass.”

“Maybe. You also told me that Reapers could be saved, but that they could remember everything they’d done. I knew that if Duncan had been made a Reaper, and if you could find him, and then if you could actually kill him after all that, that Duncan would have preferred to be dead. If not, then…” and here he shrugged again.

“How could you know I wouldn’t kill him? I stuck a knife in a warrior’s neck! I killed an entire mountain full of people! I ordered the burning of three hundred attackers!”

“You knifed a man to escape Anya’s trap, you pulled a lever to save your mother and to save your friends. You gave an order in the midst of battle to protect your people from an attacking horde. Those are very different from killing one helpless man in cold blood.”

“You could do that.” She sounded resentful and she knew it, but she didn’t care.
“Yes. But I’m a savage killer. You, Wanheda, are not.”

“You need to let that go,” Clarke snapped. Wishing it could be so simple, knowing that instead he was going to throw unintended insult back in her face indefinitely. She changed the subject instead. “So,” she asked, gesturing between the two men, “how long, really?”

Roan looked at Duncan, who apparently offered a silent response to Roan’s unspoken question. Looking back at Clarke, he said, “Duncan and I were in the same training group as boys. It’s not at all uncommon for a lot of what we consider healthy experimentation to go on. You’re supposed to outgrow it. We didn’t. Then we met Anya, once the boys and girls began to train together again. She was…” Roan’s sudden smile was brilliant and sad, and pinched Clarke’s heart really painfully. “She was splendid in every way. After that, it was the three of us. Me and Duncan and Anya. Work detail, training, play. Always together. We were even all chosen as seconds for the same war band. I don’t know who fell in love with who first. But we were young and stupid and still very conventional thinkers. We thought,” he looked at Duncan again, “I thought Anya had to choose.”

“She chose you?”

“No. Duncan had a ridiculous attack of nobility and changed bands, leaving us behind.”

She looked to Duncan, recalling the simmering tension she’d felt more than one evening on the trail. “I thought you were angry with him?”

“I am,” Duncan replied, sounding remarkably sanguine about it. “The past is complicated. But we are both, against all odds, alive. So I made a different choice this time.” When he met Roan’s gaze, his lips were curved into a small smile.

“I feel like an idiot that I didn’t notice,” Clarke said.

“It’s no one’s business but our own. And,” Roan lifted his hands, “his mother hates me. Not really interested in facing her just yet.”

“She doesn’t...” Duncan started to say, but then he stopped and shook his head ruefully. “No. She hates you a lot.”

“It’s quite unfair,” Roan said, but without any heat. “My mother adored you.”

Clarke had no difficulty imagining that Indra would find Roan’s disrespect for custom and tradition deeply offensive. Not to mention that his frequently smug attitude probably pissed her off just on principle. Clarke asked anyway, feeling that it was important to know if there were more to it. “Why does she hate you?”

“Because,” and it was Duncan talking this time, “when he was fifteen years old he stood up in council and called her a hidebound idiot who was dooming a generation of our people to death at the hands of the mountain men. And he was right.”

After that, Roan threw her out, informing her as he shut the door in her face that if she wasn’t at the stable as dawn broke he would come back inside and he would drag her out by her hair. She even almost believed him.
“You want my help to violate another clan’s citadel? To break my peace with Queen Nia? All to save Echo Kom Azgeda from failing the test of childbirth?” Lexa was looking at Clarke and Roan like she thought they had both completely lost their minds.

Clarke and her escorts had arrived on the outskirts of Polis in the early afternoon, but they did not pass through the main gate.

“I’m still outcast,” Roan had reminded her. “I can’t actually just ride straight to Lexa.”

They had skirted around the edge of the tree line, finally coming up into the city along the branch of the river that apparently served as the city’s sewer. Clarke had held back her environmental outrage mostly by biting the inside of her cheek.

Once they were in the city proper, they had left their exhausted horses and gear with Oskair, the Ark’s semi-official, semi-criminal agent in Polis, and had begun working their way across the city on foot. Clarke’s hair was once again bound up under a scarf and a broad brimmed hat.

Roan had stopped to speak with a few informants along the way. A dozen more people had approached him as they passed, all bending close to speak softly to him alone. His informants’ sidled steps and hunted glances had been disturbing enough, but by the time the three of them had reached the edge of Lexa’s headquarters, Roan’s expression had gone carefully blank. It was the same expression he wore when he was hunting game, or men, or information. She had kept looking to Duncan for clues, but Duncan’s face had grown pinched with worry. Something was definitely amiss, but Clarke had no idea what.

Now, though, they were once again in Lexa’s small audience chamber. The pleasant room was flooded with the warm evening light that poured through sheer curtains hung across the westward-facing windows. Clarke found herself wishing she could visit someday without a crisis on her hands.

Roan appeared to have shaken off his funk and instead seemed wholly focused on coaxing his sister to assist them in their plan to infiltrate the Ice Nation.

“That’s the point of the sneaking,” Clarke tried again to pitch their scheme to a very unimpressed-looking Lexa. “Nia can’t blame you for anything if we don’t get caught.”

“And when you do get caught?” Lexa’s tone made it clear that she thought this was by far the most likely outcome.

“How could she know you helped? We’d deny it.”

“Until she tortured the truth from you.”

“Okay. No. I already know that if she’s torturing me, she’s going to kill me so that wouldn’t work.”

Lexa opened her mouth, but Clarke kept talking. “Look, I don’t want to get drawn into an argument about why torture is not, in fact, a sound investigatory technique. You’re just going to have to take my word for it for now.”

Lexa’s full lips drew into what Clarke assured herself she absolutely did not care was a very pretty
“And this woman’s life is worth such a risk to your safety? How can you be so attached to this one woman of the Azgeda?” Lexa asked. She folded her arms across her chest and raised one elegant eyebrow, “Or is it merely because she’s carrying Bellamy Blake’s child?”

“It’s not just Echo, Lexa. It’s about all women and girls. Somebody has to start taking a stand for helping mothers-to-be. Stop childbirth from being a curse and a death sentence. I’m happy to lead the way, and the sooner the better!” It was easy enough to be passionate about this, because Clarke believed in every word she was saying. If she thought dramatically smacking her fist into her palm would help make her point, she’d do it.

“Hmph,” Lexa sniffed, but her glance was calculating this time rather than completely dismissive. Clarke tried not to feel too hopeful. Yet. After a moment Lexa continued, “Say you sneak across Azgeda territory successfully. Then what?”

She waited, all but tapping her toe impatiently, her curled lip making it plain that she was prepared to be disappointed in their answer.

Clarke looked at Roan, who answered for them. “I have contacts, people I do business with. They can slip us into the citadel. Once there I can get us into the palace, and Clarke and Duncan will find Bellamy Blake and Echo, find a way to aid them while I keep everyone looking elsewhere. All I need is your help with Clarke’s disguise.”

“Why me?”

“I don’t want you to hold anyone else responsible if we do get caught.”

“You think I would do that?” Lexa was peering down her nose at him, which was a good trick as he was nearly a full head taller than she was.

“I would,” he replied. “And you should.”

Lexa’s haughtiness actually intensified. “I am not you.”

“No,” he said, his eyebrows drawn down in a very stern glower and his voice heavy with disapproval. “You aren’t.”

Lexa’s head snapped up. “What does that mean?”

“Your hold on power is slipping.”

“What?”

“Haven’t you heard the whispers, Lexa? In the streets of Polis itself? Asking if the spirit still resides with you?” Roan sounded more angry than worried, but Clarke, daughter of a woman who yelled when she was frightened, felt certain that she heard the worry all the same.

Lexa did not hear the worry. “No! No one would dare say that!” she said.

She also looked truly aghast, Clarke thought.

“You are too isolated, little sister. You need to watch your back.” Roan was practically growling now, his tone registering somewhere between order and threat.

“No. You have nothing to fear from me,” he said, dismissing her charge with a quick wave of his hand.

Clarke believed him. She wasn’t sure if Lexa did.

Roan was still talking, “But the people are restless, Lexa. Three hundred warriors, some of our very best, died at your command in the failed attack on the Drop Ship. The people don’t understand how you could let that happen. They don’t understand the retreat at the mountain. They definitely don’t understand this new ceasefire with the Ark you’ve just agreed to abide by. And you are all alone now. Too alone.”

Lexa drew herself up and said, “The people are loyal to their commander.”

Roan shook his head, his hands fisted on his hips, teacher to erring student. “They are loyal to the commander’s spirit, heda. Not to you.”

“I am the commander.”

“You have the commander’s spirit. Which can leave you at any time.”

“Only if I die,” Lexa declared, impatience bleeding through her voice as she restated the obvious.

“Which can be arranged!” Roan’s voice was growing louder, his frustration with his sister more apparent.

Lexa more than matched his tone. “My people would not hurt me!”

“How? Costia has been dead for nearly three years. You killed Gustus last fall. You lost Anya and Tristan in a useless attack on the sky children. Indra has business of her own in TonDC. Who is left here to guard and shield you?”

“Myself! My warriors!”

“Not good enough!” Roan snapped.

“What?”

“Draw your blades.”

She stared at him in bewilderment. He strode to the sideboard and snatched up her scabbarded sword and long knife from their stands. Brandishing them at her, he barked, “Now!”

Then he tossed her weapons at her feet and drew his own long machete.

Without any further hesitation, Lexa picked up her weapons, drew her sword, tossed aside the scabbard and raised her blades.

Clarke scrambled back out of the center of the room, heart pounding and bewildered by the rapid turn of events. She still couldn’t believe that Roan intended his sister any true harm, but this would be a hell of a time to discover that she was wrong.

With a clash their blades met, fast, too fast for Clarke to follow at first, both of them twisting and
spinning in and out again, almost dancing around the tight space in the center of the room.

Guards must have heard the noise and came running, only to meet Duncan at the entrance, his own blade in his hands. “This is The Commander’s business,” he said. “We won’t interfere.”

“Leave,” cried Lexa, catching sight of them. “I have no need for you.”

The guards retreated outside the room. Duncan closed the door.

After another whirling, spinning engagement, the combatants backed off, circling each other warily.

Then something changed in Roan’s stance. Clarke recognized it from long evenings of training by the fire. She couldn’t have said what exactly it was, but she’d seen it when he was sparring with the other men, Duncan or Beale or Macton. He’d found his target.

This time when they engaged, Roan changed his approach completely. He caught her weaker arm, then spun directly into Lexa, using his greater weight to throw off her momentum while he twisted her wrist so hard Clarke was certain she heard a snap, and Lexa’s long knife fell from her grip. Roan kicked it aside, spun away and came back in immediately, using the flat of his blade to beat Lexa’s sword aside. Using all his greater upper body strength, he kept forcing her to block his blows, her own two handed grip on her long sword all that was keeping his machete from slamming into her side.

Every offensive maneuver she might have tried he blocked. He kept her moving backward, off balance, out of the way of his onslaught. Finally her arms couldn’t take the beating anymore, and snaking his blade along hers and jerking it out of her hands, he was able to disarm her.

Then, to Clarke’s surprise, he dropped his machete and kicked it aside along with her sword. “Take me,” he said to Lexa, holding open his arms. “If you can.”

With an audible growl, Lexa rushed him. He let her come, caught her and flipped her over his shoulder, putting her down hard.

She was rolling to her feet almost the moment she hit the ground, coming up and catching her brother with a roundhouse kick right to the gut that made him sway and grunt.

She came at him again with a series of blows he blocked with his forearms, before he found his opening, ducked and hit her so hard she doubled over, then he kicked her in the knee with such ferocity she fell hard upon the ground.

“That’s it?” he said. “That’s all you’ve got? Gustus would be so ashamed of you right now, little sister.”

Lexa was on her feet with a roar, charging him so hard she succeeded in knocking him down. They came up punching, the contact of fists on flesh loud and their breathing harsh in the quiet room.

When he knocked her down again, she glared up at him from her knees.

“Costia was tougher than this,” he said. “She wouldn’t have let you get so soft.”

This time Lexa was slower, slow enough that she took a punch straight to the face and she staggered back and her nose started to bleed. It didn’t take him long to put her on the ground again. And taunt her back to her feet. And then again. And again.
Both of them were bloody, though Clarke thought most of the blood was Lexa’s, and she was weaving on her feet and Clarke could stand no more.

“Stay down, Lexa!” she cried the next time Lexa fell, getting between them, putting her hand on Lexa’s shoulder to hold her still.

“You’ve made your point,” she said to Roan. “Now back off!”

He nodded, his shoulders still heaving with his gasping breaths, and turned his head and spat blood on the floor. “I’m taking Budeka,” he announced.

“No,” Lexa said, as Clarke helped her to sit up, her voice rough and her breathing still ragged. “You can’t take Budeka.”

“She’s my daughter, and you can’t guarantee her safety any longer.”

“She’s my ward. You’re shunned. You have no authority here.”

Roan stepped slightly closer, and dropped down so that he was on a level with Lexa. “Let her go, little sister,” he said. He gentled his voice, sincere and serious. “And once I’ve finished my current tasks, I will come back and serve you as your most loyal captain, if you’ll have me.” His voice firmed up, half order, half entreaty, his eyes burning as he stared hard at her. “You just have to stay alive until I can return. Can you do that?”

Lexa wouldn’t look at him.

After waiting another beat for her to react, Roan caught Clarke’s gaze and then shifted his eyes toward Lexa, silently asking Clarke to stay with her. Then he pushed himself to his feet and walked out the door, Duncan following him without a word.
Lessons In Polis

Clarke rose quickly, and with her hands firmly under Lexa’s arms, half-helped, half-hoisted her to her feet. She steered the commander to the closest bench, dug her first aid kit out of her pack, and ordered one of the guards who'd been anxiously hovering at the door to send for clean cloths, bandages and warm water. Then she poured out two tumblers of water.

“Here,” she said, pushing the water into Lexa’s hands. “You’ve had quite the workout. You need to re-hydrate.”

After a moment, Lexa raised the cup to her mouth and polished off the contents in a few convulsive gulps, her throat working and a trickle of water tracing through the sweat on her skin.

Once she’d finished, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and finally looked at Clarke. “Thank you,” she said.

“You’re welcome,” Clarke replied, reaching out to take the empty cup and replacing it with the full one. She told herself she felt nothing when their fingers brushed. “Let me see your left arm. You’re favoring the wrist, and I swear I heard something snap.”

“I sprained it badly in a fall a few years ago. It’s not hard to re-injure it,” she slid her eyes to Clarke’s, her voice dark with meaning, “if you know about it.”

“Roan knows? Who else knows?” Clarke was horrified by this weakness. And the way her brother exploited it.

“Yes. Lots of people. It wasn’t a secret.”

“Well, let me check it anyway.”

Lexa sighed, then held out her left arm. While Clarke examined it, Lexa sat still and patient. It had to hurt her, but she was right. It was a mild sprain, no broken bones. Clarke was pretty sure that the horrifying crack she’d heard was only Lexa’s wrist joints popping under the pressure of Roan’s grip, helped along by Clarke’s own imagination.

The warm water and cloths arrived then, delivered by an older woman Clarke remembered from her last visit to Polis. With her help, Clarke cleaned Lexa’s face and hands, paying special attention to her split lip and the bruise on her cheek and around her eye, and the angry looking contusions on her knuckles.

Clarke spread her antibiotic ointment around pretty generously, then firmly wrapped Lexa’s sore wrist with the bandages.

All finished, she said, “Are you hungry, heda?”

“No really.”

Clarke looked at the older woman. “Some broth, maybe? And bread and cheese, if you have it? Maybe in the study?”

The woman nodded and left with the basin and dirty rags.

“Come on,” Clarke said, rising and holding her hand out to Lexa. “The chairs up there are way
more comfortable than this bench.”

After they were settled into one of the deep sofas by the fire, a collection of empty bowls and plates on the low table in front of them, and Clarke’s stomach was pleasantly full, she decided that they had talked about her journeys with Roan quite enough. There were only so many breathtaking vistas and dramatic waterfalls and fields of wildflowers and oddly striking abandoned mines she could sketch with words, even to so unexpectedly warm and encouraging an audience as Lexa.

When a natural lull in the conversation arrived, she started the ball rolling again. She opened with, “I hope you’ll seriously consider taking Roan back into your service. He would be your right arm, Lexa. Together you could forge a lasting peace, or hell, anything the two of you decided you wanted. Working together, it could be yours.”

Which wasn’t an entirely comforting premise, all things considered, but it was the one Clarke had, so she was running with it.

Lexa kept watching as the flames licked the small log in the fireplace. “He’s never hit me like that before, not in any training fight.”

“He’s a big believer in teaching by doing.”

Lexa turned to look at Clarke, her question in her eyes.

Clarke explained, “We were jumped by a group of bandits, down southwest of old Richmond. I never saw them coming. Roan and the rest did, of course, and used me to lure them into a trap. Roan decided, after that, that I needed to improve my self-defense and tracking skills. We trained every other night after we made camp, right until the very end, when we were pushing hard and fast to get back to Mt. Weather. I can’t tell you how many times he, or Duncan, or Macton or Beale dumped me on my ass. They took turns.”

The men had also trained with each other. In fact it was the barely restrained ferocity of Roan and Duncan’s sparring that kept her from seeing anything beyond deep animosity between the two of them. Only later did she realize that in constantly pushing each other to the edge, they were also, in their own way, saying ‘I love you. Stay alive. Get stronger. I love you.’

“Did you get better?” Lexa asked her.

“Much better. Including a deep appreciation for my own limits.”

“You took out Anya!”

“With a tranquilizer dart she didn’t know I had,” Clarke shook her head. “If she’d known, I wouldn’t have been able to take her down with it.”

Lexa cocked her head in curiosity, “Do you carry those with you now?”

“Yes,” Clarke smiled at her. “I do.” In the pouch at her belt and in the wrist pockets of her riding gloves, both curiously complex gifts from Duncan, presented the morning they left the Mountain. “And I carry a gun. Anything to even the odds, or turn them in my favor. But hand-to-hand, or blade-to-blade, especially against a full-grown man who knows what he’s doing? I’m mostly likely dead. So my first plan with that kind of fight is not to get into it to at all.”

Lexa didn’t say anything, just let her eyes roam Clarke’s face, while Clarke fidgeted under her regard. To break the moment, Clarke added, “Your brother didn’t teach me that, by the way, but he definitely reinforced it vigorously.”
“And now you want him to help you save Bellamy’s wife?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I already told you. Because it’s the right thing to do.”

Lexa raised her brows, doubt filling her eyes.

“Yes, okay. I’m worried about what will happen to Bellamy, if Echo and the baby die.” Clarke leaned forward, her certainty and her fear pushing her closer to Lexa as she struggled to convince her how important this was, “But I’m even more worried about how that might affect our current truce. We need this ceasefire! ALIE is a threat to all of us and we can’t be distracted by fears of the Ice Nation going to war while we deal with it. But,” she twisted her lips in frustration, “I also don’t want the price to be so high it ends up hardly worth paying.”

“Nia isn’t a fool.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Clarke shrugged, “I haven’t met her. Roan has. He says she’s very sensible. But just by threatening the ceasefire, even only to play us for a greater payout, she and her people could cause a lot of damage. All they need is one unpleasant event to lift themselves into a stronger position while forcing us all into a weaker one. Keep raising their price to keep the peace, bleeding us not of people, but supplies, resources, time. Is she the kind of leader who could do that? Who would do that? Use Bellamy’s life for that?”

Lexa frowned, turning the idea over in her head. “Possibly…”

“With Echo and Bellamy alive and well and sworn to her, in her court, I think there’s less chance of that happening. No excuse for it. Don’t you?”

“Perhaps.” She sounded far less sure of this.

“Enough to be worth a shot at saving them, saving the ceasefire, saving us all? Please? Lexa?”

“So this is all about saving Echo Kom Azgeda, so Bellamy and his wife will stay in the north, and keep the peace?”

Clarke answered without any hesitation in her head or her heart. “Yes.”

“It’s what you really want?”

“For now. Yes. It’s what I really want.”

Lexa nodded, her expression serious, and her deep green eyes so close to Clarke’s own, examining Clarke’s face for the slightest hint of uncertainty. “I believe you.”

“Then,” and Clarke was suddenly taken aback to realize how close together they were now, “You’ll help me? Help us?”

“Yes.”

Lexa’s lips were gentle, a caress as much as a kiss. She raised her eyes to Clarke’s again. “Bring my brother home to me, Clarke Griffin of the Sky People, when his tasks for you are done.”

“I promise,” Clarke said, her words a faint whisper, swallowed by Lexa’s mouth against hers.
It was already full morning when Clarke woke alone, the rapid clacks of wooden training swords beating a sharp tattoo inside her eyelids until she finally gave in and opened them.

She was in the same room she’d slept in when she visited Polis the last time, what must have been an inner office of a large suite. She stretched luxuriously, feeling better rested than she’d been in months, and then hauled herself out of the blankets, reaching for her discarded shirt as she stood and went to look out the window, down into the courtyard. She immediately recognized Lexa, who was training with Roan. It was their wooden practice swords making all the racket.

As she watched, a boy came running into the yard and must have called for Lexa, because she and Roan stopped sparring. They stepped back, raised their training swords in salute, then dropped their arms. Roan reached for Lexa’s weapon, and she handed it off, exchanged a few words with him, then left with the boy. Roan disappeared from her field of vision and Clarke turned from the window to finish dressing for the day.

By the time she entered the common room, Roan was coming through the outer door, a tray full of food and a steaming pot of tea in his hands.

“You’re a manipulative son of a bitch,” Clarke greeted him.

“We got what we needed.”

“Yes,” Clarke ground out, trying without complete success not to sound pleased with herself. “Lexa has agreed to help me learn to pass as someone born to the clans.”

He nodded, setting the tray on the table and taking a seat. Unloading the covered dishes, he said, “Come eat then.”

“Doesn’t it bother you? To use people like that?” Clarke exclaimed, his genial equanimity squashing her last nerve.

“Like what?” He looked at her, sharp evaluation flickering across his expression before he got it under control, his usual air of faint amusement at the world back in place. “Did you do anything you didn’t want to do? Did Lexa?”

Before Clarke could finish calculating just exactly how childish she’d sound if she said, ‘I hate you,’ Duncan tapped at the open door.

Duncan stepped back and ushered in a woman Clarke hadn’t met before. She was medium height, just taller than Clarke, with broad shoulders, a solid build and square, capable hands. She had the tattoos and scars on her round face that marked her as a warrior. Unlike most clan women Clarke had come across, her dark hair was simply bound into one long plait that she’d pulled forward across her shoulder and it hung down the front of her body nearly to her belt.

None of that was remarkable as far as Clarke was concerned. Instead it was the bright-eyed child tied on her back and peering over her shoulder with the open inquisitive face of a baby about a year or so old.

Roan rose immediately to his feet, his hands held wide in welcome and a brilliant smile on his face. “Nona!” he said. “I’m so happy to see you.”

He took her arm in the warrior clasp, then pulled her close and into a quick one armed hug, pressing a quick kiss against the top of her forehead. “Thank you.”

“Back off,” Nona said, pushing at him with a laugh. “Duncan told me what you want, but I haven’t
agreed yet.”

Roan ignored this, his attention captured by the child. “What did you name him?”

“Adan,” she said, reaching for the tie at her waist. “Hold him, if you like.”

Roan was already lifting the child away from the loosened wrap. “Heya, fyucha,” he murmured, leaning in to press his nose against the child’s soft dark hair. “Yu noman ste yuj gona. She’s brave and beautiful.”

Clarke briefly considered dropping her head onto the table and trying to hide forever from her life. Of course Roan would be no-so-secretly baby mad.

“Nona, I’d like to present Clarke Griffin Kom Skaikru,” he said, thrusting his chin in Clarke’s direction. “Clarke? This is Nona Kom Trigedakru. She and Anya were crèche mates.”

“Hi,” Clarke said, trying to scramble to her feet without tangling herself up in the chair.

Nona regarded her silently for what felt like an age. Finally she offered a short nod in Clarke’s direction. “Hei.”

“Nona was in Anya’s war band. She would have been with her last fall, at the Drop Ship attack, but she was home on infant leave with Adan.” Roan said this like it was no more interesting than a mild observation about the weather, his attention apparently entirely focused on the baby he was playing finger tag with.

“Oh,” was all Clarke could manage.

“Later,” Roan continued, “you should tell her the story of your escape from the mountain with Anya.”

Clarke blinked, but took his cue. “I’d like that. Very much. I admired her, and I mourn her.”

Nona regarded her silently, but at least, Clarke told herself, Nona’s expression was measuring rather than completely hostile or disbelieving.

Clarke decided that was the best she was going to get, for now at any rate.

Their tableau was broken when Lexa arrived at the door. She’d obviously expected to find Clarke alone, and seemed quite taken aback by the crowd she found instead.

“Nona?” said Lexa, her voice rising with her surprise.

“Heda,” said Nona, with a quick dip of her head.

“And this is Adan,” said Roan with a wide smile. “Nona’s son.”

Lexa nodded gravely at the child. “Nice to meet you, Adan.”

Clarke noticed that Lexa clasped her hands firmly behind her back as she did so. Clearly she did not share her brother’s infatuation with babies.

“I asked Nona to come today, because I’d like you to consider taking her on as a training partner and teacher. You aren’t training nearly enough, Heda. Having Nona here will give you the opportunity to address that.”
“And put your spy in my house.” Lexa’s stare was challenging.

So was his. “And put a warrior I trust in your house.”

“We will talk, Nona,” Lexa said, finally breaking her stare-down with Roan and bowing her head in Nona’s direction. “Come with me.”

Lexa looked at her, “Clarke, you too. It will give you a chance to see two women interacting – without men.”

The glance she tossed off at her brother would have singed his skin, had he actually been paying attention to her instead of to Adan.

It was only much later that Clarke realized that both women had left Roan with the baby without so much as a backward glance.
Achilles' Daughter

Early the next morning, while the dew still sparkled on the moss growing on the cornerstones of the old buildings, Clarke stepped out into the courtyard. Turning her whole body rather than craning her neck, she looked for Roan and Duncan. Her hair, newly dyed brown, was braided back in a series of impossibly, painfully tight skin-pulling braids. Lexa – who did NOT wear such braids Clarke had been quick to point out during the extremely uncomfortable braiding session – assured her that the pain would ease with time. For now, it still hurt like hell to put any more pressure on her scalp. She was also wearing a new, at least new to her, set of clothes, all things Lexa had pulled from her own generous wardrobe.

Clarke had spent the whole previous day with Lexa, following her around and having her posture, her walk, her gestures, her head carriage all criticized. Lexa’s final instruction on talking was – don’t, unless it’s a situation where English works because you’ll never pass as fluent in Trigedaslang.

Roan was looking at the rising sun and frowning, but Duncan smiled and waved when he caught sight of her.

“Where’s Budeka?” Clarke asked, once she reached them. “Wasn’t she just with you?”

They had all joined Lexa for a very early meal, and then said their goodbyes in private. Slipping anonymously out the side gate would hardly have been possible with Lexa standing there watching them, after all.

“She said she had one last thing to pack,” Budeka’s deeply annoyed father said, reminding Clarke so much of Jake Griffin in that moment that she had to blink rapidly against a completely unexpected rush of tears.

Quick steps along the brick walkway from an adjoining quadrangle alerted them to Budeka’s arrival. She spun around the corner at a half run, her hair held back by a collection of simple braids that Clarke noted with some envy. She was dressed for travel, and was carrying a pack on her back. More disconcertingly, two other kids trotted at her heels. One was a tall, thin boy, all sharp elbows and knees and big ears, with startlingly dark eyes in his pale, freckled face. The other was a short, fey-looking girl, with warm brown skin, blue eyes, and a waving pile of soft, golden-brown curls. Both of them also carried packs on their backs, and were looking anxious and frightened and terribly, terribly excited and hopeful as they all three came to a halt in front of Roan.

“Budeka?” Roan said, his eyebrows nearly at his hairline.

“This is Rhodey,” she gestured to the boy, “and this,” she put her hand on the girl’s arm, “is Freya. My crèche mates. They should come with me to the mountain, papa. They’re both brilliant, and no one here cares. They just make jokes about how they’ll never make it as warriors, only be reaper bait. But they can be so much more! All they need are the right teachers!”

She picked up the dark case the boy was clutching in his hands and held it up. “This is a solar powered clock. Rhodey built it with scrap he’s collected.” She handed it back and turned to the girl, “Freya can calculate the orbits of constellations in her head. She’s found the remains of the Ark, the parts that are still in the sky, by calculating the trajectories for all the parts that have fallen and working backwards.” She turned back to Roan and declared, “You can’t let this all be wasted on some stupid warrior training!”
This impassioned plea rendered even Roan momentarily speechless.

Budeka stepped closer and looked up into her father’s eyes. “Please, papa?”

When her father still said nothing, Budeka turned on Clarke. “Your mother will take them in, will let them come to classes with me, won’t she?”

Clarke thought her mother would nearly stroke out with excitement to get her hands on a pair of real live grounder kid geniuses. She also found it fascinating that Budeka had seized the initiative like this. The girl had, until now, seemed the very picture of cheerful compliance. Not, Clarke recognized with some cynicism and a few faintly guilty memories of her own, that it was terribly difficult to please two adults who were as determined to be pleased by anything she did as Budeka’s father and her aunt were.

To Budeka, Clarke said, “Yes, she would take them in in a heartbeat. But…” and she looked helplessly at Roan. This was so not her call.

It was painfully clear that the two kids were vibrating with hope at this prospect. It was also painfully clear that neither was cut out to be any kind of a warrior. But just as Budeka was, they were on the cusp of that future anyway. To finally see another path must have seemed to them like a small miracle.

Roan took a deep breath and then let it out on a slow exhale, exchanging a long glance with Duncan.

Then he looked at Rhodey and Freya. “Do you have permission from your crèche leader?”

“No, sir,” said Rhodey, with admirable forthrightness, Clarke thought. “We don’t.”

“From your parents or guardians?”

“No, sir,” Rhodey said.

Roan examined them more carefully. Then he asked, “Who are you running away from?”

“I don’t have anyone to run away from,” said Freya. “My folks were taken in raids on the outer villages when I was little.”


Roan sighed heavily, and actually reached up and massaged the tension point above the bridge of his nose. A gesture of frustration Clarke had never seen him make before now. “Of course it’s Titus.”

“Papa?” Budeka reached out and touched his arm. “Please?”

Clarke watched as Roan ‘never do anything without something in return’ Kom No-Kru collapsed under the onslaught of his daughter’s liquid gaze. She thought she had never in her life experienced such a perfect sense of schadenfreude as she was enjoying right this very moment.

Roan looked back at their unexpected travelling companions. “When will you be missed?”

“At the noon meal,” Budeka replied promptly. “And only Rhodey. People are used to not noticing where Freya is.”

Roan looked at the sun again. “That’s several hours out. Can you ride?”
“Yes, sir,” said Freya.

“Sort of?” said Rhodey.

Actually he didn’t ride at all, and it turned out he was terrified to start. He was also determined to get over it, confessing over a nearly quivering chin that he was so nearsighted that he couldn’t see the ground once he was mounted, which was the reason he’d never really learned.

Roan had gotten over his hesitation somewhere between Lexa’s residence and Oskair’s barn on the outskirts of Polis, and now he was just in a flaming hurry. They’d split up to make the trip across the city. Duncan strode through the main streets with Clarke and the two younger girls rushing to keep up, and entered immediately into negotiations with Oskair to buy two more horses on the Ark’s credit once they arrived. Not anticipating any late additions to their party, they’d brought only one extra mount with them. Roan and the boy had taken a more circuitous route through the city’s dark tunnels, arriving as the rest were swinging into their saddles.

“I’m going to tie your feet to the stirrups,” Roan said, practically tossing the boy up into the saddle by the scruff of his neck. “Same as I’d do if you were my prisoner. It will be uncomfortable, but you won’t fall off. Stay in the middle of the pack, your horse will keep up with the rest. It’s going to be painful, and walking and pissing will hurt for a week afterwards, but we don’t have time for anything else. Can you do this? It’s your last chance to back out.”

Rhodey didn’t back out, though Clarke thought he nearly blacked out when he fell out of his saddle after they finally stopped for the night. They’d covered almost sixty-five miles that day, most of it alternating between a hard canter and a driving trot. The two new horses were not nearly the quality of the Azgeda-bred mounts Clarke and the rest were riding. Not only were their gaits rough and their riders white-faced by the end of the day, the horses themselves were exhausted, their sides heaving and their necks foaming with sweat. It took almost an hour and was full dark by the time the girls had walked them dry. Rhodey just lay in a small heap and tried not to cry. Clarke was also sure at least one of these new horses would be fully lame by they time they made it to Mount Weather.

Not that she’d have to deal with it. Roan was going to ride south with the three kids come morning, and he planned to meet up with Duncan and Clarke on the Azgeda-Trikru border in two days.

He didn’t want anyone on the Mountain to see Clarke in her new gear. Because, he’d said, the fewer people who saw her now, the better. She assumed he’d terrified the kids into silence. When she wasn’t looking.

Roan was almost a full day late to their rendezvous point. Clarke was on the thin edge of a nervous breakdown by the time he arrived, but Duncan had simply gone to sleep, assuring her that Roan would turn up when he turned up. Which was the stupidest aphorism Clarke had ever heard, and she told him so more than once.

“What kept you?” she demanded, almost before Roan had swung off his horse.

“Just as you suspected, those horses couldn’t take it. Both of them pulled up lame. Fortunately we were inside Ark Territory when it happened. Unfortunately,” he sighed, “we had to walk the last eighteen miles on foot. And your mother wanted six more hours for whatever she was finishing for this.” He handed her a bulging saddlebag. “She said she included a note with explanations and instructions.”

Clarke took the bag, promising herself she would find the letter tonight. “Budeka and her friends?” she asked. “How did they settle in?”
“Fine.”

Clarke glared at him.

He laughed. “Your mother took them to your friend Raven’s workshop. Rhodey nearly fainted again.”

They entered Azgeda Territory the following afternoon. The only clue they’d left Trikru territory was a faded blue scrap of fabric tied to an old fencepost. Roan led them on a circuitous route to a particularly dicey-looking village. They did not stay there that night, much to Clarke’s relief. Instead, after a quick muttered exchange between Roan and the village headman, they rode on.

From there they travelled fast along a straight but narrow trail, headed nearly due north. They split watches at night and travelled each day as long as they could still see the path in front of them. Occasionally Clarke caught sight of a watcher through the trees, but Duncan and Roan, who surely saw more than she did, ignored them. So she did, too. Eventually it dawned on her that they were riding a smuggler’s route, their watchers the organized brigands who policed it.

They reached the Azgeda citadel eight days after Roan rejoined them, converging with an ever larger number of travellers on an area to the west of the city that functioned as a giant, open-air horse and livestock market. At a food tent they learned that Yeflin’s party, bringing back Echo Kom Azgeda, sister-daughter to Queen Nia and her new husband, Bellamy Blake, champion of the Skaikru, were expected the following day. They’d been travelling all this time at a wagon’s slow pace and weren’t even in the city yet.

Elated to know that she hadn’t arrived too late despite all their travel, Clarke pulled out all her notes, the printed medical texts and her mother’s letter and set herself to reviewing everything again.

Walking herself through the steps of a caesarian delivery went quickly. Her mother’s tutorial while delivering Mari Stynasdaughter’s twins rolling out seamlessly in her memory as she reviewed the texts. She felt strong, confident, sure of herself. Her notes on how to scrape out a stubborn placenta that wouldn’t come free on its own were less reassuring, but still it seemed straightforward enough. Stitching up blind afterwards was more daunting, but still manageable. Turning to the material about low blood pressure, weak hearts, and labor left her frustrated and nervous. There were so many unknowns. Too many unknowns. Could she plan the c-section ahead of time? Could she have a blood transfusion ready to set up? They already knew that Bellamy and Octavia were universal donors, they’d been tested before they left Mt. Weather, and so supply wasn’t a problem. But what if it was an emergency situation? What if Bellamy or Octavia weren’t available? What if Echo had a heart event in the middle of an emergency surgery? Could she handle a crashing patient and a newborn by herself? Who would be helping her?

She looked over at Roan, sitting and talking quietly with Duncan on the other side of their small fire. They were camped in a huge open field, alongside what Clarke thought had to be at least a hundred other small camps, all people at the horse fair. Among all the other travellers their little group blended in easily.

“You’ve actually assisted during a delivery, right?” she asked him.

“Yes.”

“Okay. That makes you more experienced than ninety-five percent of the population at this point. You’re going to be my assistant.”
“I can’t promise I’ll be there. I may be busy elsewhere keeping attention off you. But, yes. I’ll do what I can, if I’m with you.”

“What you can?” Clarke glared at him.

“I don’t actually know very much. My job was to support Anya’s back and say things like, ‘you’re so strong, you’re so beautiful, I love you, you’re going to get through this’. My mother did all the,” he paused and flapped his hands and wrinkled his nose, “other stuff.”

“Now you get all weird about female genitalia?” she exclaimed.

“I am NOT weird,” he curled his lips around the words, “about female genitalia.” He offered her one of his lightening quick grins, “As you well know.”

She rewarded this with a sour smirk. She did know. He was very good with female genitalia. Smug bastard.

But,” and he sobered quickly, “I’m glad my mother was there. It was hard enough to watch from the other side.”

“Hard for you?” Clarke scoffed indignanty. “How? Anya was doing all the work!”

“Exactly. I’m not sure a woman could ever really understand, but watching helplessly while someone you love is in great pain because of something you did – and there’s nothing you can do to stop it but sit there and let her squeeze your arm so tightly her fingers leave bruises… She said later it was like trying to shit out a small boulder. An image I’ve never been able to get out of my head.” He shivered lightly, apparently trying again to erase it. “So, I can probably help your Bellamy know what he’s supposed to do. But that’s about it.”

“So. You plan to be useless, in other words.”

“I don’t really plan to be there at all, goat. I plan to be covering your back from Nia’s people.”

Clarke went back to her notes and texts and told herself that she could get through this. That she could get them all through this. She only lay down to rest when Duncan took the papers from her hands and pushed her over, wrapping her firmly in all their blankets. “Go to sleep,” he said quietly. “You can’t help anyone if you’re too tired to concentrate.”
Clarke had been unable to determine if there were so many people in the Azgeda citadel because of the horse fair, or because of the imminent arrival of a politically important relative of the queen and her new Skaikru husband. Or some mix of the two, with the people at the horse fair coming into the city for the show. But whatever the cause, the narrow streets were thronged, damn near impossible to move through without pushing and shoving. In the end, thanks only to Roan and Duncan creating space for her, they had secured a spot toward the front of the crowd. They had a clear view of the plaza in front of the palace and of the main road into the city through which Yeflin and his party would be entering.

They’d been waiting a few hours now, eating cold meats and breads offered by street vendors and paid for with currency Clarke had never seen in her life but that Roan carried in his belt pouch – because of course he did – when finally whispers and then the slowly mounting babble of noise along the route to the main road made it clear that Yeflin’s party had entered the city proper.

A disturbance at the gates of the palace on the far side of the plaza caught her attention. Clarke looked over to see a large group of people heading for the reviewing stand. In the center was a tall, handsome woman, a light pale-blue cloak floating behind her shoulders as she quickly mounted the steps of the platform.

She leaned toward Roan. “Is that…?”

“Yes. Queen Nia. Her chief advisors are right behind her and, I think, family? Echo’s family?”

It certainly did look like a family. It was a group that included all ages, a dozen or more adults from a grey-haired man to a boy who looked about fifteen, down to at least four children under ten and a young toddler in the arms of a tall, rangy woman who bore a striking resemblance to Echo.

What seemed like a long time later but probably really wasn’t, the crowd along the main roadway pushed back, making room for a small troop of mounted riders. They were followed by a normal horse-drawn wagon, and then by an extraordinary one. The extraordinary one was built from what looked like the bed of an open truck, the kind with arching braces to hold up a canvas cover, though the cover wasn’t on them at the moment. It was a modern, post-cataclysm take on an old covered wagon, both unusual and clever, to Clarke’s eyes. It rolled along so smoothly on large sets of double wheels that in comparison to the first wagon lurching and bumping on the rough pavement it almost looked like it was gliding.

After a second or two of staring at it in surprise, Clarke finally looked at the occupants, and laughed aloud as she made the connection. Bellamy was driving, and beside him on the driver’s seat – a well-padded, leather-upholstered bench obviously ripped from some luxury car – was Echo. The wagon had to be the work of Wick and Raven and their crew. They had built her best damn wagon they could.

Directly behind the wagon rode Lincoln and Octavia on a pair of handsome, prancing horses. Stripped down to singlets in the hot sun of early summer, their sculpted arms coated in a faint sheen of sweat, backs straight, shoulders squared and chins raised high, they were beautiful. Clarke wanted to clap and ooh and ah with pleasure, but for the wave of whispered commentary that reminded her that the audience around her had recognized them immediately as Trikru and were not, on the whole, happy about it.

The troop of riders in the lead of Yeflin’s group split once they entered the open plaza, riding the
edges of the open space and then crossing in front of the reviewing platform. At some signal Clarke didn’t catch, they all spun to face the stand, reared up in unison, and then settled to a halt in an evenly distributed double line. It was a very nice, very showy bit of horsemanship. The riders saluted their queen, and then on an order Clarke did hear, they turned and rode out of the plaza along a side road, leaving three men at the center. The men dismounted, handing off their horses to a couple of kids who ran out to take them away.

“That’s Yeflin,” Roan murmured in her ear. “The tall, heavy one in the center.”

Yeflin and the two other Azgeda with him turned to wait for the wagons. The first one turned aside immediately, following the exit route the riders and the boys with the horses had taken. The crowd parted to let them through, then swallowed them up. Bellamy drove his team nearly into the center of the open area of the plaza before pulling them to a halt. He set the brake, looped off the reins, then vaulted lightly off the side.

The crowd didn’t surge forward, exactly, but there was a general shuffling and pressing as people strained to get a closer look at the first space-born man they’d ever seen.

He looked good, really good, thought Clarke, as she raked her eyes across his form, searching for any sign of injury or harm. She let go the breath she hadn’t consciously been holding when she realized he was fine. Better than fine. He was more deeply tan than she’d ever seen him, his mop of dark hair shining in the sun. He was wearing a dark, short-sleeved tee-shirt under a light-weight, zippered vest, and she thought, with a mild mental apology to Octavia, that his arms looked almost better than Lincoln’s. He had to be sweating heavily under the dark layers, but the dark-colored vest was the same faded deep navy as the fatigues he was wearing, tucked into his laced-up military boots. More significantly, it had the Ark insignia on a large patch sewn to one breast, the Mt. Weather Ranger Patch on the other.

Bellamy was a fine student, and Marcus Kane’s lessons on the importance of first impressions had clearly taken firm root.

He strode around the back of the wagon and came to stand beside Echo. Somewhat guiltily, Clarke finally jerked her attention to her patient and promptly sucked in her breath in dismay.

Echo was still sitting on front bench. Her loose, sleeveless tunic and leggings – all a complementary lighter blue-grey to Bellamy’s darker colors – showed off that she was also very tan after a month of summer travel. Her long, deep-brown hair had developed blond highlights that shone lustrously in the sun. She had disdained any but a few tiny braids to hold her hair out of her eyes today. But under her shiny hair her cheeks were hollow, and even from a distance Clarke thought she looked exhausted. When she shifted around and finally pushed herself awkwardly to her feet, using the back and armrest of the front seat, Clarke could see that under the light fabric of her knee-length top her huge belly was low and rigid, almost angular, and her navel had begun to protrude. All of these were classic signs of impending labor. Her belly was obviously heavy and uncomfortable, because Echo had adopted the habit of reaching one hand under it to support some of the weight. To Clarke’s further dismay, she thought it looked like even this effort had left Echo breathing heavily.

Clarke’s muscles knotted with new tension. Twisting her fingers tightly around the straps of her own pack in a desperate attempt to ground herself, she whispered under her breath to Duncan and Roan, “Echo doesn’t look good! This is bad. Really bad. She should’ve had her scheduled Caesarian a week ago! Goddamn and fuck this Yeflin bastard. We’re so lucky she didn’t go into labor on the road, because there’s no way they could have handled that alone.”

Lincoln and Octavia had dismounted, tied their horses to the back of the wagon, and now they
joined Bellamy on the ground beside Echo. Lincoln and Bellamy reached up, and in what was clearly a practiced maneuver, half-caught, half-lifted Echo to the ground. Her knees bent as she landed and she let out an audible ‘oof.’ When she straightened up Octavia slipped into her side and got an arm around Echo’s waist. It looked to Clarke like Echo was standing on her own feet, still holding up her belly with her hands, and that Octavia was there for balance.

By the time they had Echo on the ground, the heavy-set man, Yeflin, arrived. He held out his arm to Echo. His words were too quick and guttural for Clarke, but clearly he was intending to be the one to escort her to the Queen.

Bellamy, who had turned and looked like he was reaching to retrieve something from the wagon, caught sight of this and headed back. Whatever he said next had Yeflin dropping his arm and turning on Bellamy, his face contorted in a sneer Clarke could read from her spot in the crowd at the edge of the plaza.

Ice ran up Clarke’s spine. She felt the confrontation brewing even before she saw it in the set of Bellamy’s jaw, in the flash of Octavia’s eyes, heard it in the harsh tones of Bellamy’s voice, speaking words she couldn’t quite make out. Then she saw Yeflin’s mouth moving, heard his growling voice, knew he was baiting Bellamy. She could see the muscle leap in Bellamy’s cheek, saw that his hands had curled into fists at his side, and knew he was about to lash out, verbally or physically.

She was murmuring to herself, to Bellamy, trying to communicate telepathically with him across the crowded space, “No, no, no. No, Bellamy. Stay calm, ride it out, whatever he’s saying…”

She glanced at Roan, saw he was watching the scene as intently as she was, “We have to do something! We have to stop this! How do we stop this?” she whispered urgently.

Back in the plaza Echo called out their names, her voice commanding and her posture erect. Bellamy and Yeflin stepped back from each other, visibly checking themselves. At Echo’s gesture, they both turned to the reviewing platform. The Queen had risen to her feet and now she raised her arms. She spoke in the Azgeda variant of Trigedasleng. Her voice was good, deep for a woman and strong, easily filling the open space. Duncan leaned over Clarke’s shoulder to translate, “Welcome home, beloved Echo, daughter of the Azgeda. We are eager to hear of your months with the new people from the SkyArk. But for now, we see that you need your family and some rest after your difficult journey.”

Then the Queen turned and nodded, releasing the family on the platform to swarm down the steps and head for Echo. A babble of hearty welcoming cries burst from them as the children ran to greet her first, their arms open wide. As the family drew closer, the women went straight for Echo, but two of the younger men approached Lincoln and Bellamy, holding out their arms for the warrior’s clasp. Clarke realized these must be Echo’s brothers or brothers-in-law, men Bellamy and Lincoln would have met when they brought Echo home the first time, a lifetime ago.

The younger of the two men got to Bellamy’s side and after the quick clasp and a hearty “Bellamy!,” pulled him into an embrace which had the happy, and no doubt intended, effect of easing Bellamy further away from Yeflin. Bellamy returned the hug, ducking his head to speak quietly to him, waving his hand at the wagon beside them.

“Hector, please bring your family’s newest member forward to be introduced to us,” Nia called, Duncan’s whispered translation buzzing against Clarke’s ear.

The eldest man of Echo’s family bowed his head and shoulders in the direction of the Queen, then turned to find Bellamy. Then Hector beckoned Bellamy to his side, and the two men began to make
their way toward the receiving platform.

The man Bellamy had been talking to, Echo’s brother or brother-in-law, said something Clarke couldn’t catch to the older kids. The two biggest went over and peered into the wagon bed, then a taller boy swung one of the smaller kids up and over the side. Together they lifted out a folded wheelchair, and Lincoln emerged from the small milling crowd to help them set it up. Echo sank down into it with every appearance of gratitude. Another tall rangy woman, this one with grey streaks in her once dark hair, Echo’s oldest sister perhaps, stepped behind to take the handles.

Clarke had relaxed when Echo had successfully called off Bellamy and Yeflin. Now, as she watched Echo’s chest lift with her obviously shallow, stressed breathing, Clarke’s adrenaline shot back up again. She’d been focused on the placenta growing into the wall of Echo’s uterus, and the difficulty of expelling it or removing it safely. She’d concentrated on the surgery, on the repair, on delivering a healthy baby. Her mom had been watching Echo like a hawk up until she left, and Echo had been doing well. Despite her pregnancy, her heart had actually been continuing to heal from the damage caused by the Mountain Men’s harvest program. Clarke had known that Echo’s heart might be a problem for them. For Echo. She’d tried to be ready for it, all the while hoping desperately that it really wouldn’t be an issue. But now? Now Clarke was suddenly terrified that Echo’s damaged heart was the only problem that really mattered.

Meanwhile, Yeflin had turned and was stomping toward the Queen, his face dark with anger and calling out over the crowd something that Clarke could only translate as an outraged, “Your Majesty!”

Then a new disturbance drew everyone’s attention in the opposite direction. With a rising babble of voices, the crowd at the main road, which had filled in after the wagons had entered, swirled and parted. In through the new opening strolled Roan Kom No-Kru.

His boots and trousers were dusty, his exposed arms and face coated with the same thin film of dirt. This wasn’t magical. Clarke and Duncan were covered in the same road dust. Roan was wearing his hair pulled back from his face and with his old, canvas pack on his back he looked exactly like he’d been on the road for months. He might have passed unnoticed for all of that, but for his guns. He had uncovered his rifle and was carrying it cradled in his arms, his hand not quite near the trigger. He’d also strapped the big handgun Kane had given him to his right thigh.

He’d shaved off his beard once they reached the citadel, complaining that it itched, and now he looked exactly like himself. There could be no mistaking him, no masquerade, no more disguise.

Roan. Fully armed with the guns he’d spent a lifetime recovering.

Clarke’s jaw fell open right along with everyone else standing near her. She kept blinking madly, trying to make sense of what she was seeing. He’d said his job was to provide a distraction. She’d begged him to intervene. But she had never entertained even the slightest idea that this would be his solution! What the hell was she supposed to do now?

Into the silence that fell around him, Roan kept right on walking straight for the Queen. His shoulder-rolling swagger was so totally over the top it came right back around to seeming like the most natural gait in the world on him. With a wide, toothy grin, he said to Nia, in English, one warrior to another, his deep, amused voice carrying clearly around the square, “I’m almost disappointed. I thought this crowd might all be for me.”
Queen Nia had turned to see what was happening in the plaza when she heard the crowd noise change. When she saw – and obviously recognized – the man swaggering towards her, she folded her arms across her chest and, Clarke could swear, smiled and shook her head in amusement at his bold greeting.

“Roan Kom Trigedakru,” Nia replied, casually dismissing the polite fiction that Roan was without a clan or clan loyalties. She also sounded more intrigued than upset, asking, in English, “What the hell are you doing here?”

Clarke was so engrossed in the scene playing out in the plaza that she gasped and jumped when Duncan’s fingers closed around her elbow in an iron grip. He started pulling her after him as he wove them quickly through the transfixed crowd.

Coming at last to a halt right in front of the platform, Roan assumed a pose so nonchalant it flirted impressively close to disrespect. He called up to the Queen, “I’m here to ask you why the hell your people are mining limestone in Trikru territory.”

Queen Nia dropped her hands to her hips and narrowed her eyes reprovingly. “Disputed territory, Roan,” she said.

Clarke realized that Duncan’s destination was a spot where the crowd had surged closest to Echo’s family. Her family and the oversized wagon now lay between Duncan and Clarke and most of the other people in the crowded plaza, including especially the people on the platform. Who, like everyone else present, were all staring at Roan with various expressions of surprise and horror. Only Nia appeared to be enjoying herself as she looked down at her unexpected visitor.

Roan affected shock at Nia’s assertion. “Disputed territory? Are you sure, Your Majesty?”

While everyone else in the plaza was still mesmerized by Roan’s sudden appearance, Duncan practically jumped himself and Clarke across the small open space between the edge of the crowd and the family surrounding Echo. Slipping quickly into the middle of the group, Clarke reached for Octavia’s shoulder, her attention still riveted on the scene unfolding in front of the reviewing stand.

Up on the platform, Nia had raised her eyebrows as she stared down at Roan. Her voice was now very dry. “Yes. It is definitely disputed territory.”

Octavia turned at the touch on her shoulder, frowning in confusion and then her eyes opened wide and she gasped quietly, “Clarke?”

Clarke raised her finger to her lips, and then slid her eyes forward again.

“Well, then it seems,” Roan paused and smiled up at the Queen, the better to layer in as much innuendo as he could, “we have some disputing to do.”

Nia shook her head in mock dismay, “Your mouth will get you killed yet, Roan.”

“Then I’ll die a happy man, Your Majesty.” Roan followed this up with an outrageously exaggerated wink.

By this point some of the quicker or braver or more reckless members of the crowd had gotten over their shock and started to play along with the scene, laughing and catcalling their approval for...
Roan’s boldness and their Queen’s wit.

Back in their little group, Echo must have heard Octavia’s gasp because now she spun her head to look up. When she met Clarke’s eyes her own filmed with sudden tears of relief and she smiled with such hope and trust that Clarke’s own heart almost stopped. She really didn’t have the vaguest idea what she was doing! The last time anyone had depended on her for their very lives, she’d ended up bringing death raining down on everyone around them, burning strangers by the hundreds to save her own precious few. How had she thought that running straight into the same situation all over again was the right idea? For one searing instant, Clarke wondered if there was still time to turn and flee.

Echo reached for Clarke’s hand, her slim fingers cold despite the hot day and her grip shockingly tight. Clarke wondered if Echo realized how close Clarke had been to giving in to her panic and bolting into the crowd. Echo caught her sister’s sleeve, mouthed words that Clarke couldn’t decode once she had her attention, but must have been something like, ‘play along.’

Clarke looked for Duncan, and saw that he was with Lincoln. Lincoln was speaking quietly to one of the men of Echo’s family, who was looking back and forth between Duncan and Clarke and nodding rapidly. The man caught the attention of the same teens again, and issued a quiet instruction that turned out to be unloading various packs from the wagon, and passing them out among the family until everyone who didn’t have a kid to keep track of was carrying an additional bag or pack, which neatly disguised the bulky packs that Clarke and Duncan wore.

Meanwhile, out in the plaza, still enjoying her performance, Nia had waited for the crowd to settle down again. Then she gestured to the steps, inviting Roan to join her, “You’d best come up then.”

Yeflin, who had been flapping his jaw uselessly in the face of this completely unexpected arrival overshadowing his moment in the sun, now called out angrily, “Take away his guns, at least, your Majesty!”

Nia turned to Roan and raised her eyebrow and, her voice still carrying clearly, asked, “Are you planning to shoot me, Roan?”

Roan’s grin was positively gleeful as lifted his rifle over his shoulder, barrel pointed away and toward the sky and drawled, “Not with my guns, Your Majesty.”

Nia laughed, then looked at Yeflin and shrugged, as if to say, ‘see? no harm here,’ and then she waved Roan up a second time.

Accompanied by cheers and hoots of approval, Roan jogged lightly up the steps. Once he was on the platform, he bowed over the Queen’s hand, actually bending fractionally from the waist in the deepest sign of respect Clarke had ever seen from him. At that point, Clarke fully expected him to raise Nia’s hand to his lips, but apparently the Azgeda hadn’t quite gone completely medieval. Yet. Instead it was simply another warrior’s clasp, which apparently also signaled the end of the entertainment as both of them turned away from the audience to face the others on the platform.

Clarke finally started to breathe easily again.

“He’s a piece of work,” Octavia muttered in Clarke’s ear as she nodded at Roan. “He’s even bigger than the stories!”

“In his own head maybe,” Clarke snapped, her tension and her relief coming out as anger.

“He bought us the time you needed,” Lincoln said quietly from behind them. “But now we have to
move. Jason says they have rooms waiting for us in their quarters in the palace compound. Come on.”

With Clarke and Duncan safely ensconced in the center of the family group, and partially shielded by the wagon which the youngest of the women had hopped up in to drive, they left through the same side road that had swallowed up the previous wagon and the mounted horsemen.

Behind its walls, the palace complex was quite large. It looked to Clarke’s eyes as though the Azgeda ruling clan had started with the old government buildings, a county courthouse and a city hall if she was reading the faded carving correctly, and simply grown them into each other and then outward with repurposed brick and sandstone walls to encompass the surrounding structures.

Jason, one of Echo’s older brothers Clarke learned from a whispered conversation with Octavia, led their group to one of the outer edges of the sprawling structure. Jason urged everyone but the young adults inside, delegating to the younger members of the family the job of finishing the unloading and then putting up the wagon and the horses.

Once they were safely indoors, Jason turned to face the newcomers. “Welcome, Clarke Griffin and Duncan son of Indra,” he said, with a very brief nod. “Lincoln says you are here to help?” His expression could not have been more doubtful.

Clarke’s heart sank a little. Echo’s family hadn’t had any warning, she reminded herself. They couldn’t have known what today would bring. They didn’t know the full extent of Echo’s situation. They didn’t know how worried they needed to be. She looked at Duncan, and as though he had said it aloud, she heard, “It’s all yours, kid.” She hoped he caught her wry ‘thanks’ in return.

“Yes,” she said to Jason. “Thank you for the welcome. I’m a doctor in training, further along in my studies than Octavia. I hope together we can help Echo and the baby safely through labor and delivery.”

“You know that this is not our way, yes? Whatever you could do up in the sky, Clarke Griffin of the Skaikru, with your women and your children, we on the ground cannot afford genetically damaged children, or risk them polluting our bloodlines. Children and their mothers must pass the test alone. These rules are based hard experience, earned in grief and pain.”

Clarke bit the inside of her cheek. She could only wage one battle at the time. “I understand, sir. But I promise you this baby is perfect, and Echo need not risk death to bring him safely into this world. I intend to do everything I can, including break rules, to see that she does.”

Octavia broke in, “Bellamy is going to ask for permission. Beg for it. He will do everything he can to make sure that Echo and the baby survive. Anything he can.”

Jason nodded somberly. “I hope he prevails, Octavia Blake. But with Roan showing up to ‘dispute about territory’, Clarke could hear the disdain in Jason’s tone, I’m not sure Nia will be paying much attention.”

“Roan is actually on our side,” Clarke said. “At least in this,” she shrugged. “The territory issue is also important. I don’t know how much you’ve heard of the talks that led the ceasefire, but ALIE is real. The nuclear warheads are real. Anything that could lead to warfare between the clans could trigger another cataclysm. I’m not sure what would survive after that.”

“You know Roan?” Jason did not look as though this news filled him with joy or confidence. “He supports the cease fire agreement?”
Lincoln cleared his throat, and Clarke heard the warning to tread very, very carefully.

“Yes, I,” she hesitated, searching for the right word, “negotiated,” Clarke was watching Lincoln as she spoke, and he was nodding in encouragement, “with Roan to bring Duncan and myself to you. He was willing because he was coming anyway, to put the territorial issue before Nia. In part to keep the dispute from damaging the cease fire, which he does support.”

“And how does this put him on ‘our’ side?”

“I had to tell him why I wanted to come. It turns out, he also thinks the practice of isolating women during childbirth is wrong. In fact, he broke that rule to be with his partner when she gave birth to their daughter. And he doesn’t want his daughter to face it alone when her time comes, someday, when she’s grown.”

Jason looked extremely skeptical, but he dropped the subject. “And you obviously know you are breaking the agreement with Yeflin to be here at all?”

“Yes,” Clarke nodded, “I do.”

“Jason,” Echo said, wrapping her hand around Clarke’s once again. “Please. I am glad Clarke is here, and whatever she and Octavia can do is more and better than what anyone here can. And,” her voice hardened, “Yeflin can…”

“Echo!” Jason said, “That’s enough.”

Clarke got the distinct impression that Jason was worried about her being overheard, not that he disagreed.

“I’m also glad she’s here,” broke in the older woman who had been pushing the wheelchair. She turned to Clarke. “My name is Andromeda, I’m Echo’s sister. You are welcome in my home, Clarke Griffin, and I will assist you in any way that I can.”

“Then,” Clarke said, “I’d really like a private space to do a quick check up with Echo? I’m worried that she’s spent too much time in the sun.”

“Of course,” Andromeda said. “This way.” And she steered them out of the room.
First Time of Asking

Bellamy was still seething with the overwhelming desire to turn around and punch Yeflin in the face. It was a very familiar seething. An old friend at this point, almost. He was so used to it now that he could swallow it down without gagging hardly at all. But the day would come, and it was getting closer all the time, when he gutted that asshole.

But for the present, Echo’s oldest brother Hector had his hand firmly against Bellamy’s shoulder, pressing him lightly forward towards the Queen’s reviewing stand. It was almost as if he knew what Bellamy was feeling. Or, Bellamy took a quick look at Hector’s clenched jaw, as if he shared that feeling. Hector slid his eyes toward Bellamy at just that moment, and their gazes locked. The ghost of an understanding smile appeared on Hector’s face and Bellamy realized, to his immense satisfaction, that they shared a mutual loathing for the Queen’s Representative.

They had just climbed the steps and were making their way to Nia when they heard the crowd noises behind them deepen dramatically in excitement and saw that everyone on the platform was staring, but not at them. They were instead transfixed by whatever was going on out in the plaza behind them. Bellamy spun on his heels to check on Echo, but barely had time to be relieved that she was safely seated in her wheelchair when he realized that everyone else was staring at the man strutting leisurely toward the reviewing stand.

He was a grounder, but without any obvious clan marks that Bellamy could read. He was tanned and travel-worn, with tattoos spiraling down his exposed and dusty forearms and up his neck. He was clean-shaven, and wore his hair long and tied back simply. No complicated braids, no feathers or bones or beads. His clothes were also striking for their relative simplicity. Dirty, plain linen shirt, with the collar open and the sleeves rolled up above his elbows. Plain brown trousers tucked into dusty riding boots, and a faded green canvas pack almost covering up the hilt of the sword he wore on his back. A simple long knife hung from his belt.

But that wasn’t what had caught the crowd’s attention. Or what had Bellamy’s own jaw hanging loose in shock.

The stranger was carrying guns. He was cradling a standard, Guard-issue M4 semiautomatic rifle in his arms, and he had a 45-millimeter service pistol strapped to his thigh. These were the weapons of the Ark Guard, of the Mt. Weather Rangers. Bellamy and Lincoln had identical sets buried in their baggage in the wagon. How in the fuck had this grounder gotten his hands on those?

Bellamy, like everyone else in the plaza, was staring so hard his eyes felt like they were bulging out of his head.

Guns in grounder hands. Guns in excellent condition. Guns that Bellamy felt certain were completely functional, and had full magazines, and whose current possessor knew exactly how to use.

Totally aware that all eyes were on him, the stranger waited until he had reached the area immediately in front the reviewing stand before calling out, “Is this whole crowd here for me?”

And then Nia greeted him by name. Roan Kom Trigedakru.

Now Bellamy couldn’t tear his eyes away if his life had depended on it. This was the man who had disappeared with Clarke almost two fucking months ago, and now he was here. In the Azgeda Citadel. Trading heavy innuendo with the Queen of the Azgeda, who gave every indication of
thoroughly enjoying herself, all while claiming to be worried about some sort of territorial dispute over a limestone quarry. Of all the trivial things Bellamy could think of, were they actually arguing about (and flirting over) a fucking limestone quarry?

Then Yeelin, of course Yeelin, pissed off that someone else had stolen his thunder, came barging back into their word play. Bellamy couldn’t help it, he laughed right along with half the audience when Nia and Roan between them all but bitch-slapped him down.

Hector cleared his throat meaningfully, a warning Bellamy did his best to heed. He stopped laughing, but he was pretty sure that if he’d had a mirror handy, he’d be able to read his own expression as a satisfied smirk.

Once Roan and Nia turned away from the plaza, Hector guided Bellamy forward again.

“Ah, yes, Hector,” Nia saw them approaching, “You were about to introduce us, before we were so,” Nia paused to lock eyes with Roan, who was still standing beside her, his rifle balanced rakishly on his shoulder, “dramatically interrupted.”

“Yes,” Hector acknowledged her with a nod. “May I introduce Bellamy Blake of the Ark and Mount Weather, Your Majesty?”

“And very soon to be Bellamy Blake Kom Azgeda, yes?” said the Queen with a smile, her tone full of velvet-clad iron.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Bellamy said, firmly repressing the faint tremor in his heart at the sound of that name on the Azgeda Queen’s lips.

“Have you had the opportunity to meet Roan yet, Bellamy?” the Queen asked.

“No,” said Roan, easily interjecting himself into the Queen’s conversation before Bellamy even had a chance speak. The man had balls to spare, thought Bellamy, with a certain amount of unwilling admiration.

“We haven’t had the pleasure,” Roan said with a slight smile and a nod at Bellamy.

“I think you know…” Bellamy started to say, but before he could finish, before he could ask about Clarke, Roan interrupted again.

“General Kane? Yes. We did some business recently,” Roan said with another easy smile as he slid the rifle down to rest on the safety strap that hung from his shoulder.

Bellamy frowned, and started to speak, but Roan cut him off again by turning to catch Nia’s eye, “Perhaps I should find a place to store my new weapons?” He shrugged and offered her a boyish grin, “They are drawing a lot of attention.”

Nia nodded and called to a member of her staff, and before Bellamy had another chance to speak to the man, he was whisked away.

“So, Bellamy Blake,” Nia said, recalling Bellamy’s wandering attention. “You fully understand the meaning of your pledge?”

“Yes, ma’am. I do,” he said. “I will renounce my allegiance to the Ark and swear my loyalty to the Azgeda, for as long as Echo lives. And to that end,” Bellamy rushed on, refusing to be interrupted, “I have a request, Your Majesty. I’d like your permission to stay with Echo, with my wife, when she delivers our child.”
Nia frowned. “That is not our way.”

Almost at the same time, Yeflin started in with, “Your Majesty, I…”

Nia waved him to silence. “Let me hear the man out, Yeflin.”

Bellamy seized his moment. “I know it isn’t, ma’am. I understand that. But it is our way, the way of my people, on the Ark. For us there is nothing more shameful for a man to do than to leave his wife to labor and deliver alone, without his support and strength behind her.”

Nia raised her brow, but, “Interesting,” was all she said.

Bellamy took this as permission to keep talking. “The trip has been hard on Echo, she’s not as strong as she should be, but her time will be very soon now. I can’t just stand outside and wait!” His voice was deeper and louder, his emotions were getting the best of him but he couldn’t help it, didn’t want to help it. This is how he moved people and it was the best tool he had right now. “Not when I can help her, not when I should help her! I owe her everything for carrying our child this long on her own! I can’t just…”

Nia held up her hands and Bellamy stuttered to a halt.

“I see,” she said. “I see that this is very important to you. And I think I can understand how strange our ways must seem.”

Bellamy started to speak, but Hector’s hand on his shoulder restrained him.

“I also saw how weak Echo is,” Nia said, her voice reassuring. “I understand your fear, and your need to protect her. To help her. We will talk again. But for now, you should go check in on your wife.”

Bellamy could do nothing but follow Hector’s lead, bowing from the shoulders as Nia swept down the stairs, her closest advisors trotting after her.

“This way,” Hector said in his ear.

Echo’s family quarters were in the far back of the palace, and Hector filled the walk with the inconsequential babble of the tour guide. The only things Bellamy paid any attention to at all were the locations of the exits.

They’d hardly entered the main room, and Bellamy was still looking around for Echo, when he heard someone call his name in a voice he’d feared he forgotten. He spun just in time to catch Clarke as she launched herself into his arms.

He held her close and buried his face in her hair, and for one quiet moment the whole world stood still and everything calmed.

“Clarke,” he said, aware that his voice broke on her name and painfully conscious of the eyes of the room on them. He let go and stepped back, almost exactly at the moment that she did the same.

“How in the hell,” he started, but then he got completely sidetracked, “Your hair is brown?”

Clarke laughed self-consciously. “Yeah. It’s a disguise,” she waved her hands and made a funny face. “You know. So the Wanheda doesn’t panic the children or stampede the cows.”

“How did you get here?” He couldn’t contain his relieved grin, didn’t even want to try.
“Duncan,” she pointed out the familiar man across the room. Bellamy sketched a quick nod and wave that Duncan returned easily, “and Roan. They brought me. We arrived last night.”

“Roan?” Bellamy frowned. “The guy from the plaza? With Ark guns?”

“Yes. Him. And those are his guns now. Part of our deal.”

“His…permanently?”

“Yes. Permanently.” Clarke shook her head at him, dismissing his concern. “That’s not important. Echo is. I don’t suppose you had a chance to speak to Nia?”

Hector chuckled in a not very amused way. “Yes, he already asked for permission to stay with Echo. His passion and concern are certainly admirable, if not his sense of timing.”

Bellamy turned and met him eye to eye. “My timing is fine. It’s the baby’s timing that’s the problem.”

“Yeah, exactly.” Clarke took his wrist. “Echo’s resting down the hall. Come on, she’ll want to hear everything.”
“Octavia? O?” Bellamy’s hoarse whisper and his hand on her shoulder roused her from a deep sleep.

“Bell?” Octavia was instantly awake, but she was also so groggy her head felt full of stuffing and her eyes were gritty. She’d been up too late with Clarke going through their surgery plan again. Clarke wanted them to perform the Caesarian as soon as they had permission, or at least when no one was looking. She didn’t want to wait for Echo to go into labor, not wanting to put any extra stress on her heart.

Octavia sat up, which cleared her head a little. Enough to realize why Bellamy would be waking her before dawn. To realize that their surgery plans were all for nothing. “Echo?”

“Contractions have started,” he said, his voice pitched low, doubtless out of respect for Lincoln, who was still snoring lightly beside her. Who was probably faking it in a desperate bid to go back to sleep as soon as she left. “Real ones this time,” Bellamy added. “I think you should fetch Clarke.”

Octavia stood in front of the closed door and debated whether or not to knock, or to slip in and wake Clarke, the same way Bell had woken her. She finally decided to go in and rouse Clarke as unobtrusively as she could. She pushed the latch, opened the door a crack, and eased through the narrow opening. Only then did she open her eyes. In the cold, pre-dawn light she saw that Clarke and Duncan were sound asleep, shoulder-to-shoulder in the small double bed crammed into the corner of the very small room they’d been assigned. They’d stripped down as far as faint decency allowed, and were on top of the light sheet. Tendrils of Clarke’s still-disconcertingly dark hair were stuck to her fair skin.

The room was stifling and still. What little coolness the night had brought had not penetrated this far into the apartment, despite the small barred window high up near the ceiling. Octavia was pretty certain this had been a storeroom before their hosts had carted out whatever was here and rustled up the mattress. She’d actually offered to switch up, let Duncan bunk with Lincoln while she stayed with Clarke, but Clarke had just laughed incredulously.

“I’ve been camping rough with the man for nearly three months now, Octavia! We can handle a room with a door and a mattress.”

“So…you and Duncan…?” Octavia had let her eyebrows pose the rest of the question.

Duncan was a good-looking man. He was just older than Lincoln, just taller than Bellamy. Like Wells Jaha, he wore his soft black hair trimmed close to his dark skin and was clean-shaven. He had his mother’s high, broad cheekbones, square jaw and full lips. The scars on his face lent him a dignified melancholy that made his rare smiles all the warmer, and he was very protective of Clarke. His expression, when Hector had implied that any forbidden interference from Clarke would result in Clarke’s immediate unmasking before Queen Nia, had been quietly terrifying. Octavia couldn’t help but see that Duncan had his mother’s eyes, see that her warrior’s spirit burned just as fiercely in her son. Octavia would totally understand if something were going on between Clarke and Duncan.

“Duncan?” Clarke had exclaimed, with a light laugh. “No. He’s…” she’d paused thoughtfully, “he’s a friend, I think? But he’s a hard man to know well. I suspect that was true even before the Mountain took him. Now? It’s almost impossible.”
“He seems very protective of you,” Octavia had observed, with another meaningful eyebrow arch.

“He has a debt to clear. He takes that very seriously,” Clarke had replied. And then she had changed the subject.

Now, Octavia tiptoed the short distance to the edge of the mattress and touched Clarke’s shoulder. “Echo’s contractions have started,” she whispered.

Clarke dragged her eyes open, blinked several times, and then sat up. “Damn.”

Octavia did not share this sentiment. She understood why Clarke would have preferred surgery to natural labor. It would put all the control in her hands. But Octavia knew the clans better than Clarke did, even now. A Caesarian would be impossible to hide or explain. And while it had better outcomes for women with Echo’s condition, it was possible to see a woman with a full term infant safely through labor and delivery even with the ingrown placenta.

Clarke scrubbed her face, and then shook herself out. “Okay. I’ll be right there.”

Her voice was even huskier than usual this morning. Octavia experienced a sudden insight as to why Bellamy had sent her to wake up Clarke instead of doing it himself. The…thing… between the two of them still buzzed, insistently enough that even near strangers like the members of Echo’s family could feel it.

Limit, deflect, avoid seemed to be his strategy of choice in dealing with it. In this, he had Clarke’s full cooperation. They hadn’t been alone together since Bellamy discovered her in the family quarters. Not, Octavia reflected wryly, that there were many places to get away given how surrounded and crowded they all were.

Echo was sitting on the side of her bed when Octavia entered, her light tunic hiked up to expose her slim, bare thighs. Bellamy, wearing nothing but his trousers, was kneeling at her feet, looking up at her, his big hands on her belly. “I can feel that. Can you?”

Echo nodded, “Yes. How long?”

Bellamy looked at his watch, his courtesy of the Mountain Men. “Seven minutes since the last one. They’re getting closer.”

“I’ll be so glad when this is over,” Echo said.

Bellamy’s smile was dazzling as he met her eyes. “That’s when the adventure begins.”

Echo grinned back at him, then leaned down and kissed him, threading her fingers into his tousled hair as he responded with enthusiasm.

Exactly the same moment that Clarke walked in.

Octavia tried to read her expression, but Clarke was too damn good at pushing everything down, everything away. Her face remained smooth and still. Only her eyes burned, but with what Octavia couldn’t decide.

Clarke shooed Bellamy to the head of the bed, did a quick examination, and reported with a bright grin, “Yup. Four, maybe four and half centimeters dilated now. That’s a full centimeter more than last night.”

Echo looked faintly relieved. “Does that mean it’s too late for the surgery?”
Clarke nodded. “Yeah. At this point, we’ll save that for an emergency, which shouldn’t arrive. His head is in the right place, and you’re doing well. We’ll see it through, right?”

“Yes,” Echo tried for a smile. It was only partially successful. “How long will it take to fully dilate?”

“First child? Anywhere from six to twenty-four hours, but the average is eight to ten,” Clarke said.

“Ah, shit,” Echo grimaced suddenly and hunched forward, a light sheen of sweat glistening at her temples as she hissed between her teeth, “Tell me why anyone does this more than once?”

“Because babies are beautiful, and they grow up too fast and leave your arms empty,” Andromeda was at the door, a tray with tea and bread in her hands. She looked around the room. “I heard voices. Does this mean labor has begun?”

“Early labor,” Clarke said. “It’ll be some hours yet before the active stage.”

Eventually they were joined by other members of Echo’s large family, especially the women, who apparently by custom occupied these hours with horrific stories from their own childbirth experiences. Or, at least Octavia found them horrific, even after spending the last month familiarizing herself with all the manifold ways pregnancy and childbirth could go dreadfully, tragically wrong.

It wasn’t really the stories themselves that were horrific, Octavia eventually decided. These were all women who had survived with their health mostly intact and with live children. Though Octavia knew that at least one of them – and she didn’t know which – had surrendered a child with an exposed spine to the winter elements, and at least two others had lost infants soon after birth to health problems unknown, or, unnamed. No, instead it was the ghoulish delight that some of them seemed to take in it. One of Echo’s sisters-in-law positively relished recounting the bloody and painful details of her various experiences, leaning forward to pat Echo’s knee as she reached the next graphic, blood-drenched development in the epic sagas of her multiple birthings. Her stories seemed designed only to frighten and disgust Echo. It made Octavia’s skin crawl. And not just Octavia’s either.

“Did you know,” Echo asked of the room, once the latest gruesome tale concluded, “that the day I met Bellamy, we were being held in cages no larger than kennels? Waiting to be strung up by our ankles and hung upside down so the Mountain Men could pump their poisoned blood into us while they stole our healthy blood for themselves?”

No one responded, too shocked to speak. Octavia held her breath, willing everyone else to do the same. Because this was more information than Echo had ever offered about her experiences inside the domain of the Mountain Men. Octavia remembered, from working with the former reapers, how important and how cathartic this first telling could be. She prayed that none of the women in the room would try to stop her.

Echo glanced around, her stare challenging. Octavia’s prayers were answered. No one said a word.

Echo went on, “when we were first captured by the Reapers and delivered to the Mountain Men, they stripped us of all our clothes and our paint. Once we were naked, they burned our skin with powders and soaps and chemical rinses, scraped us raw with brushes. Everywhere. Every crevice, every crease in our bodies. Do you remember, Bellamy?”

“I do,” he said, his deep voice rough and thick with emotion. His eyes were as hard as Echo’s as he stood at his post by her side, glowering down at the bent head of the sister-in-law-from-hell. “My
skin bled from the chemicals. The powders and the rinses burned, especially the raw places. Like bathing in alcohol or hydrogen peroxide. The brushes were so stiff they felt like wire. They held us in place with steel collars around our necks attached to long poles. Our hands were bound. We stood on grates that cut our bare feet. We were naked and alone while groups of men in masks and full body suits and gloves treated us like diseased animals.”

Octavia bit her lips and blinked furiously to keep any tears from leaking out. He had walked into that knowing from what Lincoln had told him what he would face. He had done it anyway. For the delinquents. For the Ark. For all the grinders who’d been captured and put through hell and eaten before him. Her beautiful, brave brother. She wondered if he’d ever really believe how much he was admired. Loved. She’d wanted him to talk about it, to process his experiences as prisoner of the Mountain Men, tried more than once to give him the opportunity. He’d ignored her every time. But now, in defense of Echo, he stripped himself naked once more.

She looked at Clarke. She couldn’t help it. She’d always wondered if he’d ever told any of this to her, but Clarke looked just as shocked and grieved as everyone else in the room. This made Octavia fiercely glad, despite the tears that had finally spilled out of the corners of her own eyes. Glad in an obscure jealous way that he hadn’t shared this with anyone before now. Not even with Clarke. Glad that Clarke finally had to listen to another person, and then another, telling their own stories of their own pain and their own trials. Clarke had clung to her status as the most abused, most devastated entirely long enough in Octavia’s view, and she needed to get the fuck over herself once and for all.

“They forced pills down our throats with metal tubes, and put us to sleep with drugs shot into our bodies with long metal needles,” Echo was panting now as she spoke, her hunched shoulders and strained face making it clear she was experiencing another strong contraction. Her knuckles were white as she gripped the arms of her chair. Bellamy stood behind her, his arms crossed as he watched her, patient and full of concern. They’d already established that Echo absolutely did not want to be touched now, not while she was actually experiencing a contraction. But she didn’t stop talking. “What they did to our bodies when we were unconscious we will never fully know, but most of us have reason to guess.”

Echo’s sister Sefona, closest in age and in Echo’s heart, had tears streaming down her cheeks. Sister-in-law-from-hell was staring at the floor.

As soon as Echo’s grip eased, Bellamy dropped down to kneel on the floor at her side. He covered her hand with one of his, their matching wedding rings glinting darkly against their skin. “You warned me to be still,” he said to her, only to her, reaching up to stroke her hair gently back from her face. “Then, even from the cage they held you in, you saved my life, helped me kill a man so I could escape.”

Echo looked at him and smiled before she turned her head to kiss his palm. Then she asked the room, “Did you know that I was there for one full month?” When no one answered, she continued, “They fed us bread, but left us hungry to make us docile. We drank water that was stale and full of dirt. We couldn’t truly sleep in the cages, we couldn’t stand or stretch out, we could only doze, the wire pressing into our skin. It was never dark or quiet.” Her fingers were wound tightly through Bellamy’s now, and he had his hand on her back, rubbing gentle circles as she talked. His eyes were dark with worry and, yes, pride in her. “There was no way to relieve ourselves in privacy, and those in the lowest levels, our cages were stacked you see, ended up enduring a rain of piss and shit and blood and vomit. When it got bad enough, when we stank too much for them to bear it, they hauled us back to the showers and the wire brushes.”

She looked at Bellamy then, “If you hadn’t come that day, hadn’t drawn attention to yourself so
they wouldn’t bleed me, I think I would have died there. Instead you came back for me.”

“We don’t leave people alone when they need us. We don’t leave people behind, ever,” Bellamy said. Though he was looking only at Echo, Octavia knew he was talking to the whole room.

Demon sister-in-law finally harrumphed, too uncomfortable with the long silence that had fallen to be still, but having nothing to say.

“You think to scare me now?” Echo looked directly at her sister-in-law, her expression and her voice both dripping with disdain. “After all I have survived to reach this point? To have this child with this man?” She raised her chin, her mouth drawn into a flat dismissive line. As she stared down the high arch of her nose she was once again the bitch princess of the Ice Nation Octavia had first known, to whom Bellamy had first responded. “If so, then you are a silly and trivial woman and I wish you to be quiet now. And if you can’t be quiet, you should leave.”

Bellamy’s smirk was priceless as he watched the unfortunate woman exit, her head held high, but her face full of angry embarrassment.

Another strong contraction for Echo gave another of Echo’s sisters the chance to launch into a humorous recounting of her last delivery, which was long on laugh lines and thankfully very short on any gory specifics.

Then Bellamy amused them all by recounting – in vivid detail – his experience of assisting their mother, to the best of his six-year-old self’s abilities, during Octavia’s birth.

“I thought you told the Queen that men stayed with their women on your Ark?” asked horrible sister-in-law’s even more horrid sister, who (only God knew why) hadn’t left with her sibling. She was clearly delighted at having found a hole in Bellamy’s story.

“I did stay,” he said, his eyes challenging and his grin smug. “Good men do. Even when they are six. Or even any men who know that they should. But our mother was breaking the law to have a second child. I doubt Octavia’s father ever even knew our mother was pregnant. Not that we could ask him. They tried to find him, to see if he was complicit in her law-breaking. But he was long dead by the time our mother’s crime was discovered, and he had never fathered any child that he knew of.”

“A second child was a crime?” The ladies were all agog, in equal parts curious and appalled.

By the time Bellamy and Octavia had explained the Ark’s core dilemma – too many people, not enough air – and how that had impacted population planning, Echo’s contractions had increased to less than five minutes apart and left her keening. Clarke shooed everyone but Bellamy out, including Octavia.

Octavia tracked down Lincoln and Duncan and begged them to talk to her about anything other than babies. To which she promptly had to add as off limits: weapons, weapon care, bodily functions, entrails, blood, death, and shit. “Hell, woman!” Lincoln snorted. “What is it, exactly, you think men talk about?”


“It is unusually warm this season,” Duncan said, nodding solemnly, “but I think it will rain before the week is out. It should be a good year for the fruit trees. And,” his full lips curved into a tiny, very self-satisfied smirk, “a very good year for fucking.”

“Agreed to that, brother,” Lincoln said with a wicked smile, raising his fingers to brush lightly at
Duncan’s.

Octavia dropped her head into her hands while Duncan and Lincoln sniggered helplessly at their own (lack of) cleverness. The heat and the waiting were driving them slowly mad, right along with everyone else she decided.

A stir at the outer door had everyone rising to his or her feet and Duncan vanishing into the storeroom. To everyone’s relief it was Hector and Jason. But Hector’s announcement that Nia was holding audiences this morning and requested Bellamy’s presence promptly sent Octavia’s pulse back up into the stratosphere. When Jason added that Octavia and Lincoln were expected too, Octavia actually felt light-headed, and wondered briefly if heart problems were contagious.
Sunlight was pouring into the Queen’s audience chamber through the high windows along the southern wall. The windows were all open, but very little breeze found its way in. Already the day was hotter than the one before, though it was not yet even noon.

It was odd, Octavia thought, how little bits of old civil procedures still floated around. To Octavia’s eye, trained since birth on the vast digital media of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Nia was sitting in what was clearly a modified judge’s bench. Before her the room was filled with rows of long wooden benches with curved wooden backs. Behind her hung the seal and flags of the Ice Nation. In the desks below hers, clerks were taking notes in large, leather-bound books. The Ice Nation had either never lost, or had quickly recovered, bureaucratic record keeping.

When Octavia arrived with the rest of her group and they took seats in the back, Nia was dealing with some other petitioner, something about market stalls as far as Octavia could tell. Once Nia reached her decision and waved the woman away, Nia leaned over and said something to the man standing next to her.

He called Bellamy forward, inviting his family and advisors to accompany him if he wished. Octavia, Lincoln and Hector definitely wished to accompany him, filing after him to stand behind him in a show of support.

“Welcome before the Azgeda, Bellamy Blake,” Nia said with a warm smile. She spoke in English, either as a courtesy, or to make a point of her fluency or both. “Are you ready to complete your oath?”

Bellamy had donned his summer guard uniform before they left Andromeda’s rooms. Now he stood at parade rest before the Ice Nation Queen looking every inch the soldier he had become. “Echo has begun her labor, ma’am. Have you reached a decision about allowing me and my sister Octavia to stay with her until our child is born?”

“I had heard the rumor.”

“It’s not a rumor. We need to know your ruling.”

Nia leaned back and crossed her legs, resting her head against her fist, her elbow propped on the carved arm of her chair, the very picture of judicial contemplation. “Why your sister?”

“Octavia is a medic. A healer who trains specifically for battlefield conditions. Childbirth,” he allowed a faint wry smile to twist his lips, “as I’ve heard in great detail this morning, is a kind of battlefield.”

Nia lifted her head and raised her brows. “You stayed for that?”

“I made her pregnant. To run away now would be, for me, for my people, an act of cowardice.”

Nia examined him thoughtfully for a moment. “Do you ask to stay for her sake? Or for your own honor?”

“Both. For her safety and comfort first, my honor second. As it should be.”

“And if I rule against you?”

Second Time of Asking
Bellamy stared hard at Nia for what seemed like a long time, the muscle in his cheek jumping as he wrestled with his answer. Finally he stood a little straighter and said, “I’ll break your rule.”

Octavia closed her eyes and gripped Lincoln’s hand tighter, taking comfort in the strength of his unwavering support. This was the only answer Bellamy would ever give, could ever give. That he had managed to sound regretful and polite rather than challenging was very little consolation.

“You understand that Echo and the child, if it survived, would be outcast then? As though the child was a mutant?”

“As long as the Ark holds the mountain, Echo and our children have a home and a refuge.”

Into the astounded pause that followed this declaration, Yeflin rose from his seat among Nia’s advisors in the old jury box and gestured dramatically at Bellamy. “You see!” he cried, his face contorted with a triumphant sneer. “Just as I warned you! It is this fundamental disrespect for our ways that renders any attempt to treat honorably with the Sky People meaningless. Your Majesty, it is exactly as I have been telling you all along!”

After a well timed beat, Yeflin allowed his voice to grow louder and deeper, his gestures grew more dramatic and theatrical as he flourished his arm in Bellamy’s direction, “He is their champion, hero of the final battle against the Mountain Men, one of their leaders, and Echo’s husband, and yet he cannot honor even so simple a rule concerning the birthing of an infant. He will not respect our need for healthy children and mothers who can survive their first, most important test. This ceasefire we have agreed to, at their request, will prove just as false as his commitment to the Azgeda.”

After shooting an angry, sideways glare at Yeflin, Bellamy brought his gaze back to the Queen. “My commitment to Echo and to her people is real. The ceasefire is real, ma’am. And Yeflin is right. It is exactly like my commitment to be with my wife when she gives birth to my child. We of the Ark want people to live. All people. Our people, your people, people of clans and nations we haven’t yet met. And all women and all children. War can bring nothing but death and misery for everyone involved.”

“Are you saying you doubt our commitment to the lives of our own people?” Yeflin asked, in an outraged semi-bellow.

Bellamy had gotten calmer as Yeflin grew angrier. Now his voice was clear and firm. “No. I’m saying you are wrong to doubt mine.”

“And your love for your Wanheda!”

Octavia felt the collective intake of breath around the room, the ghostly touch of air moving quickly across her sweat-dampened skin.

“I…” Bellamy stuttered to a pause, loud in the silence around them. “What?” He managed to look genuinely baffled.

“Everyone knows you are in love with your Wanheda, Clarke Griffin of the Sky People! That your marriage to Echo is a sham, a ploy, a trick of the Skaikru. To take from us what is rightfully ours!”

This time, Bellamy turned his head to look at Yeflin. Octavia could only catch a sliver of his profile, but to her shock he looked vaguely triumphant, the same look he’d worn whenever he’d managed to maneuver a hundred teenage delinquents into doing his bidding. He shifted to look up at Nia again. “Your Majesty? I don’t know your rules here, or your customs. But that man,” he
gestured with his chin, “just insulted my wife. Insulted Echo’s intelligence, her honor, and her heart. Among my people,” he allowed himself another quick, cutting glance at Yeflin before looking back to Nia, “I’d now have the right to punch him in the face. But I will follow the rules of my new clan. Of the Azgeda.”

“I…” Yeflin blustered, but Nia extended her hand, palm up, and he fell silent, broadcasting his resentment through his glower and his clenched fists.

She flicked her glance along the crowded box of her advisors. Whatever information she gathered seemed to confirm her decision and straighten her spine. “I rule that Bellamy Blake and his sister the battlefield medic, Octavia Blake, and,” she raked her glance around the room, “only Bellamy and Octavia Blake may stay with Echo Kom Azgeda as she delivers her child.”

This collective gasp was somehow less appalled and more approving than the previous one, though Octavia couldn’t have explained how or why she thought so.

Nia looked down at Bellamy, “You must give me your word that you will assist only in a natural childbirth. We cannot bend so far today as to allow a Caesarian, either before or after Echo’s death.”

Octavia started, shocked beyond stillness to hear that word on the Queen’s lips.

“Yes,” Nia’s glance took in Octavia. “We are fully aware of this possibility. It is an ancient remedy, after all. But newborns without mothers are a burden on the community as much as a mutant child is. The technique is forbidden. If it is attempted, even if the child survives, he will be guilty of his mother’s death. Blood will have blood. The Azgeda can lay claim to his life in compensation for the loss of his mother.”

“Your Majesty…” Bellamy began to protest, but she held up her hand of silence again and he snapped his mouth shut.

“If you were to try and run with him, to live with your son as an outcast, you would have to escape the citadel just as a mother who strives against sanity and the will of her people to save a mutant infant must fight for her child’s life. This would be a very dangerous course of action, and it would violate your oath of loyalty.”

Before Bellamy could form a response, Hector spoke up. “Thank you, your majesty. I speak for Echo’s family and we are all most grateful for your ruling. From our love for our sister and her husband and her new sister, we are grateful for your benevolence.”

Nia nodded graciously at him, then looked at Bellamy once more. “We will hear your oath now, Bellamy Blake.”

Bellamy’s voice rang loud and clear in the bright room, as he repeated after Nia in English, and then again in the Azgeda variant of Trigedasleng. “I swear, on my life, that I renounce my loyalty to the Ark and the people of my birth, that I will be of the Ice Nation, to serve their Queen, to follow their laws, stand against all their enemies, and walk my path with theirs. I swear that I take this obligation freely, without reservation, or in service of another.”

And then, he added without prompt as soon as he finished the formal oath, “as long as Echo Kom Azgeda lives.”

Nia narrowed her eyes, but nodded. This, after all, had been a provision of his oath from the beginning. She said, “Bellamy Blake Kom Azgeda, as long as Echo Kom Azgeda shall live you are
one with our people.”

The man who stood to her left banged a gavel three times.

It was done. Bellamy was sworn to the Azgeda, loyal to another ruler, and more firmly lost to Octavia now that at any other time in their lives. She felt the cover of the box she had lived in under the floor closing tight, stealing away air and light and hope forever.
As they exited the audience room and turned into the long and twisting corridors that led back to Andromeda’s quarters, Bellamy kept sneaking glances at Octavia’s white face. She seemed to be so lost inside her own head that if Lincoln hadn’t been guiding her Bellamy was sure that she would have tripped and fallen on the steps outside the door or slammed into a wall.

Before he could find the words to ask her what was wrong, to assure her that his love and loyalty to her were unchanged, they passed a small corridor that must have led to the back entrances of the old courtroom. Roan Kom Trigedakru slipped out and fell into step beside Bellamy.

“Well played, Bellamy Blake,” he said quietly in his deep, raspy voice. “You gained more from Nia today than I’d anticipated you could.”

“Uh…” was the only intelligent sound Bellamy could offer, too startled by Roan’s sudden arrival to say anything more.

“Of course,” and Roan paused to grin at him with disturbingly cheerful malevolence, “Yeflin publicly insulting you and your wife made your task easier. I know it’s not as satisfying as doing it with your own fist, but he’s probably wishing he could punch himself in the face right now.”

“No,” Bellamy managed to choke out. “Not as satisfying.”

“But gaining your sister’s assistance, that was very smart. I thought it would only be your presence that Nia allowed. It’s a nice precedent for the future you’ve set between you.”

Hector glanced back just then and was obviously dismayed to see who had joined them. “Roan,” he said, “I didn’t see you in Nia’s chambers.”

“I was in the back,” Roan said, “trying not to draw attention to myself. Successfully, it seems.” And then he smiled briefly at Hector, obviously amused by the man’s poorly concealed distaste.

“And now?” Hector’s expression was that of a man who had discovered bird shit on his jacket.

“Now I’m walking with you,” Roan replied. “Offering Bellamy my observations.”

Hector narrowed his eyes. “In exchange for what?”

Roan’s smile grew positively beatific. “Whatever he thinks they are worth.”

“I hope you know that offending Yeflin further puts us all at risk,” Hector hissed angrily, clearly holding Roan somehow responsible for the situation.

“I do. But it also puts him at risk. He’s revealed himself more in the last two days than he has in the past five years.” Roan glanced at Bellamy again, his lips twisting into a faintly mocking smirk. “Nothing like facing down an angry young buck to make an old one bellow. Your last month of travel must have been excruciating to endure, but surely would have been amusing to observe.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Bellamy said, equal parts annoyed, offended, and vaguely embarrassed. “You have any other observations to offer?”

He’d had a chance to talk with Clarke the day before, not for long and not privately, but long enough to ask her point blank if she trusted Roan. She’d never really answered him. Glancing at
the man walking casually alongside him now, he concentrated on recalling as much of their conversation as he could.

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“Do I trust Roan?” Clarke titled her head to the side as she considered the question, her eyes focused inward. After a moment or two, she shook herself out and said, “That’s a tricky concept in the clans. Roan is always warning people, warning me, not to trust them. But I think he means that generally, as in, people of the clans never tell you all they know, and that a simple agreement, without a true exchange, is meaningless.”

“Do you trust him not to hand you over to Nia?” he demanded.

“Oh, that. Yes,” she assured him, airily brushing off his concern with a wave of her fingers, “I do. Mostly.” And then she actually chuckled.

He wondered if yanking at his own hair would make anything better. “Why?”

“Because we have a deal,” she explained, her expression earnest and sincere. “An exchange. A debt. Roan honors his deals. Pays his debts. That’s what the people of the clans do. Especially the Trikru. If they don’t, they’re banished. Or killed. Depending on the nature of the offense.”

“Isn’t he already an outcast?”

“That’s not the same thing, and anyway it was complicated.”

He was utterly taken aback by her dismissive response. It must have shown on his face. Clarke sighed, and then tried to explain. “He was angry, too angry to submit to the Commander’s decision to pull back from engaging the Mountain Men directly. So he waged his own private guerilla war, alone in the wilderness. By the time the council finally decided to act, he was already mostly gone. So it was kind of a,” Clarke deepened and slowed her voice to signify authority figures, “you’re cast out,” and then she changed to a lighter voice, “you can’t cast me out, I’m already gone,” and then she switched back to the authority voice, now sounding frustrated, “well don’t let the door hit your ass on the way out,” and then she was back to the lighter voice, singsonging, “I can’t hear you, I’m already over the next mountain, la, la, la!” and then back to her own voice as she concluded, “type of situation. Pretty ambiguous all around really. And it works for everyone to leave it that way.”

Duncan, who was sitting nearby, burst out laughing. “That’s the most accurate summary I’ve ever heard. You’ll have to share it with him one day.”

Clarke grinned fondly at him, “Thanks! I’ll be here all week.”

Bellamy tried not to feel the way his gut twisted, told himself he could not possibly be jealous of Clarke’s easy familiarity with a man she’d spent more time alone with than she’d ever spent with him. Of course she’d be familiar with him. And also with the infamous Roan, who would apparently be amused by her gently mocking version of his story.

“And anyway,” Clarke added, growing serious again. “If Roan hadn’t pulled his stunt in the plaza, we couldn’t have slipped in to join with Echo’s family. We’d probably still be out lurking around the palace walls trying to find a way inside.”

“And you? What’s your part of the deal?” he asked, a terrible certainty crawling up his spine that personal risks, like the one Roan had engaged in the day before, offering himself right up to the
Queen herself, were very heavy debts indeed.

Clarke’s laughing eyes shuttered, and Bellamy knew immediately that he was going to hate whatever she said next. “It’s a multi-part thing,” she said. “His guns, for a start. His daughter is at the mountain now, for another. And a future debt to be redeemed at a later date. The Wanheda still packs a lot of influence, you know.”

“How did you even meet this guy, Clarke?” he burst out, sounding angry even to his own ears, but too upset to be cautious.

She raised her chin. “He saved my life.”

“And put you in his debt.”

She beamed at him, as though he were the brightest student in the class. “Yes!” she said. “You’ve got the feel for it now!”

“What do you have to do to clear it?”

“That one is clear.”

“That one?”

“There may have been some other life saving going on. It’s a dangerous world out there Bellamy. And,” she pinned him with a very sharp stare, “these are my debts, and mine alone. You can’t interfere.”

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Remembering her words now, as he cast sidelong glances at the hawk-like face of the man who held her debts, he knew he bloody well was going to interfere. It wasn’t good for the Ark for their Wanheda to be compromised like that. He was going to clear them himself. Once he figured out how. After the baby was born. After Echo was safe. After they both were safe. It was a task he’d never agreed to, but would dog him every day until he cleared it. Then it occurred to him that actually listening carefully to Roan now would be a start.

“Yes, I do have more thoughts to share,” Roan was saying, leaning companionably close as they walked, keeping his voice low. “Nia isn’t in a position to let a challenge to her authority pass. Which is why she gave you permission to do what you were clearly going to do anyway.”

Bellamy nodded. He’d suspected something along those lines himself. Though how Roan came to be so sure of what Nia knew, or what Nia could or might do was more than a little disconcerting. If Bellamy had read the scene accurately at the Plaza yesterday, if everyone he’d talked to had read the scene accurately, there was a very good chance that right now, Roan was indulging in a risky bout of kiss and tell.

“Yeflin will be even more dangerous now,” Roan continued. “While you are fully sworn to the Azgeda and afforded some new protections as a result of that, he will also have more means to hurt you and those you care for.”

Bellamy grimaced. That was something he’d guessed, but the confirmation wasn’t good news.

“And you should be thinking hard about how long the ceasefire needs to last.”

Bellamy swiveled his head around in surprise. “What?”
“I know the Ark needs to disarm the computer ALIE, but war will come once they have accomplished that task. This ceasefire gives everyone time to prepare. Which means arming themselves as well as they can. The less time the Ark gives them for that project, the better.”

“Why is war coming?” Bellamy knew he nearly wailed his whispered question, but damn did these people and their endless desire to kill each other frustrate him.

“The clans are used to operating with their back to the wall, under the guns of the mountain. Now they are gearing up to rip each other to shreds to see who gets to be on top, because they can’t imagine any other way to survive.”

“I thought that Lexa was on top? The Commander?”

“You mean, ‘The Commander in Chief’?”

Bellamy had that odd sensation of finally getting the joke. Only it wasn’t funny at all. “Oh.”

“Really? You just now got that?” Roan lifted his brows in faintly disappointed surprise.

“Well, the whole heda spirit thing…” Bellamy tried to explain, but trailed off helplessly because he didn’t get that either.

“Is surprisingly flexible. In some ways, it would be nice if your Skaikru had any interest in the job.”

“What job?” Bellamy had the bewildering sensation that he and Roan were talking about two entirely different things. And he didn’t know what either of them were.

“Taking the place of the Mountain Men. Many among the Clans hoped that the Skaikru would, after you took the fortress at Mt. Weather.”

“Become the oppressive tyrants?” Bellamy was horrified.

“Yes. It’s familiar. Orderly. But,” Roan shrugged good-naturedly, “I understand that it’s not your way. I mean,” he caught himself and offered Bellamy a faintly conspiratorial smile, “the way of the people of the Ark. So – the only question that remains is whether the clans fight each other first, or come for Mt. Weather. I thought they’d fight each other first, and then take the Ark down. But this ceasefire is giving them opportunity to negotiate an alliance to take the Ark out first, and then fight each other. They are already taking steps to do this. Yeflin is one of the leaders in this undertaking.”

“All twelve of the clans?”

“Only four clans have any chance of coming out on top, so he only needs two of the other three to agree. Which means it’s an arms race for them. However, if things can be pushed in the right direction in the next few days, Yeflin might be silenced or displaced. This would slow everything down. Maybe even halt it.”

“What does any of this have to do with me?”

“Yeflin has tied his reputation for upholding the standards of the Azgeda to your child’s birth. I don’t know why or how he came to let that happen, but he has. Which means you and your wife and your child are now all levers that others can use to either move Yeflin, or to block him. And use you they will. Better to be part of the game than only a pawn for others, yes? Turn yourself into a knight, at least, hmm?”
Bellamy felt his jaw flapping uselessly. Roan had just used a chess metaphor. Chess! The man was a fucking chess player because of course he was a fucking chess player! Bellamy suddenly hated chess.

They had reached Andromeda’s apartment and any further conversation was cut short as they were practically besieged with family wanting the news. A quest that was completely upended when one by one, Echo’s family saw that Roan was with Bellamy’s party and fell silent, mouths gaping in shock.

“Hello,” Roan said into the hush, his easy confidence and bright smile fully on display. “I know I’m intruding at a busy time, but I need to speak with Hector and Andromeda. But first, I must speak privately with Duncan. Is there a place we could talk?”

Duncan, who’d been standing quietly in the background, gestured with his head. “This way,” he said. Roan vanished with him into the tiny closet Duncan was sharing with Clarke.

Questions poured out as soon as the door down the hall closed with a firm clicking of the latch.

“That’s excellent!” exclaimed Andromeda, once she’d finally pieced it all together from the ensuing babble. She wrapped Bellamy in a warm hug. “Welcome to the Azgeda, brother. And I’m so glad you’ll be able to stay with Echo!”

“When will the rest of us have to leave them?” Clarke asked from across the room.

“Crowning,” Andromeda replied firmly.

Then her bitch of a sister-in-law, Hector’s second wife Bellamy had finally figured out, married after his first wife died in childbirth, objected. “I did it alone five times, sister, from the onset of contractions…”

“Your choice, of course, Sera,” Andromeda said. “But that is not the custom and you know it. A mother is traditionally alone from crowning until the delivery of the afterbirth. That is our way. Though Echo will have the aid of her husband and his sister, the rest of us must leave them undisturbed to assist Echo as best they can, without any further interference.”
“Octavia?” Clarke had slipped to her side as soon as she and Lincoln entered. “You look dreadful. What’s happened?” Clarke looked back and forth between Octavia and Lincoln, ignoring the babble surrounding Bellamy, Hector, and Roan, the always-unexpected guest.

“The heat,” murmured Lincoln, ever the loyal partner, half-shielding Octavia from the crowd, half-supporting her as he maneuvered her onto a bench on the far side of the room, away from the immediate chaos and noise at the door. If there were ever a man long overdue for a completely well-deserved freakout, it was him, thought Clarke distractedly. But she really hoped he’d hold it together until they could get back to Mt. Weather.

Octavia was white-faced, her eyes almost sunken into her skull, and her expression frighteningly bleak as Lincoln deposited her onto the seat. Clarke dropped down beside her, her hand on Octavia’s back. “Put your head down, O,” she pressed lightly between Octavia’s shoulder blades to guide her. “Down between your knees, lower than your heart. That’s good. Now just breathe, slow and steady.”

Clarke looked up at Lincoln, who was seated beside Octavia, his expression full of concern. “What happened?” she asked quietly.

“Bellamy swore his oath to Nia. To the Azgeda. He renounced the people of his birth. Of the Ark.”

Clarke felt her own spirits drop a little at the news, even though she’d known Bellamy would have to do this. She ducked her head low enough that she could see Octavia’s face, which was looking slightly less peaked as blood flow returned. “Octavia? I’m so sorry. I know you know that it’s not about his personal loyalties, right? You’ll always come first for him, whomever he’s married to, whatever his political loyalties are. You know that, right?”

Octavia sat up just enough to put her hands on her knees to support her weight. “There’s not enough air, Clarke,” she gasped. “It’s like being under the floor again.”

“Okay. Put your head back down. I want you to count your breathing. Four counts in, hold for eight, out for seven. Got it? One, two, three, four, now hold, two, three…” Clarke continued the count until she was sure that Octavia had the rhythm.

Once Octavia was breathing steadily, Clarke looked back at Lincoln. “And Echo? What did Nia decide?”

Lincoln actually smiled at her, relief lighting his face. “She said that Bellamy and Octavia could both stay.”

“But not anyone else?” Clarke asked, meaning, of course, ‘not me.’

Lincoln shook his head. “No. No one else.”

The quiet in the rest of the room drew their attention then, and Clarke looked up just in time to see Duncan and Roan vanishing into her storeroom bedroom. Eager voices rushed to fill the silence left behind by their exit. Hector and Bellamy explained all that had happened, including the exchange with Yeflin, trying to keep to a clear narrative despite all the questions. Finally, Clarke had the chance to secure Andromeda’s decision about how long she could stay with Echo, and how soon she could return. By that point, Octavia was finally sitting up and leaning into Lincoln. Her color was better and her eyes looked almost normal.
“Take your time. Get something to eat, drink lots of water,” Clarke said to her. “I checked on Echo just before you all got back. She still has about two centimeters to go, and her blood pressure is low but steady. It’ll be two hours, give or take, until the next stage and then it will be all your show. Which you can totally handle.”

Clarke actually had no idea if either of them could handle this. The bleeding with *placenta accreta* could be ten times as much as with a normal delivery. Though Echo’s low blood pressure might be a blessing in disguise on this front. They were going to have to work very fast once the baby was born, and no plan withstood contact with the enemy. A terrible saying she’d picked up from Roan somewhere along the road, as if she needed a stupid aphorism to remind her that it was impossible to anticipate every single contingency – and she was absolutely not going to think about Lexa’s betrayal any longer – and you had to be ready to wing it.

Shaking herself out of her funk, she finally trailed after Bellamy to the room he shared with Echo. He’d taken the chair by the bed and was talking quietly to her. To his wife, Clarke reminded herself, looking at the rings they were wearing and trying not to get maudlin about it all over again. Abby had told her what she’d done, how and why she’d offered up her and Jake’s wedding rings, and Clarke had understood and applauded the gesture. Easy to do at a distance of four hundred miles.

Now, watching him holding Echo’s hand between his own while wearing her father’s ring, Clarke wasn’t nearly so understanding, even though she still supported her mother’s choice.

Bellamy was leaning close, probably reporting on all his adventures during his formal audience with Nia. As Clarke watched, another contraction contorted Echo’s face. Echo was clutching Bellamy’s arm now, not the bedding, and Clarke knew that her grip had to hurt like hell. Bellamy just covered her hand with his own and waited while she rode it out.

Resuming her chair in a corner by the window and settling down with her medical texts and notes open and unread in her lap, Clarke gazed out at a kitchen garden. She tried to decide if she wanted Roan to summon her to whatever conferences he was holding, or if she’d rather he not. About the time she’d decided *definitely not*, the man himself tapped at the door, Duncan at his shoulder.

“Hello?” he said. “May we come in? I’d like to introduce myself to the woman of the hour.” Then he smiled at Echo, in that special way he had of smiling at someone like they were the most fascinating person in the whole wide world.

“Of course,” Echo said, struggling to sit more upright and shaking out her hair as she smiled back.

Bellamy stood and vacated his chair, his face fixed in a studiously blank expression but something hot and unhappy swimming in his eyes. He came to stand next to Clarke, ostensibly looking out the same window to the kitchen garden, but she would have sworn he saw nothing at all. “What the hell is his deal, Clarke?” he hissed under his breath, jerking his head in Roan’s direction.

“Believe it or not,” she answered in an undertone, “he truly wants everyone to live and to prosper.”

“He just strolls in here like he owns the place, Hector obviously can’t stand him, and yet everyone defers to him all the same. What kind of power does he have?”

“None at all.”

“What?” he turned his head to glare down at her.

“He doesn’t have any power. But,” and here Clarke shrugged, “he does have his hands on a lot of
“And you?”

“Yeah,” Clarke chuckled a bit ruefully, remembering Polis. Remembering Lexa. “He can pull mine too, when it suits him.” She looked up at him then. “Why are you so touchy about him?”

“I feel like he’s pulling us, me, Echo, the baby, you, the Ark, all of it, into some great web.”

“The web was already here, Bellamy. We fell into it head first when we dropped out of the sky and we’ve all been all tangled up in it ever since. He’s the only person so far who has indicated any interest in helping us get upright. You know, for a price. But still. It’s the only offer on the table.”

“Bellamy?” Roan’s voice interrupted them from across the room. “Echo needs you now.”

Echo was leaning forward, her arms wrapped around her raised knees and clearly experiencing another very strong contraction, her breath hissing through her teeth as she moaned quietly through the rising intensity. Roan and Duncan backed away as Bellamy resumed his place by Echo’s side. Which meant his place by Clarke was now available for Roan. Who took it promptly, bringing a stool so he could sit next to her.

“Nia suspects you’re here,” he said as soon as his head was level with hers, wasting no time. “She doesn’t want to know for certain, so it’s our job to make sure she doesn’t have to. Be careful. Not all of Hector’s family is happy about this situation.”

“Let me guess. Sera.”

“For a start. Fortunately, Nia believes that they are only petty, and not allied with Yeflin.”

Clarke scowled.

“So use it,” he said. “I need to know how things go as soon as possible.”


“Yeflin has gambled heavily on the outcome of Echo’s pregnancy, and it will affect his actions. For me to counter them, I need to have any information at least as soon as he does. Sooner would be better. As soon as the talebearers get to Nia, I’ll know. So keep them moving.”

“This Yeflin,” Clarke asked. “What’s his deal?”

“He wanted to be King. Nia and her family’s faction outmaneuvered him and his bloc fifteen years ago. He also wants the Ice Nation to take over for the Trikru. And for the Mountain Men. With himself on top, of course.”

“And you prefer Nia to Yeflin? Why?”

“She’s a forward thinker. He’s not. She brought the Azgeda into the coalition and still backs Lexa, despite the debacle at the Mountain. He wants to replace Lexa with himself and rule an empire. She’s interested in reviving technology. He’s opposed. She thinks birthing rules have become ridiculous. He fears mutation more than he values the lives of pregnant women. Need more?”

“No. That’s more than enough!” Clarke said, holding up her hand to stem the flow. She looked over at Echo again, who was lying on her side, resting her face in the palm of Bellamy’s hand while he was murmuring something that sounded encouraging. Clarke felt a flash of anger. They
deserved none of this. They should be home, at the mountain, in her mother’s care. She looked back at Roan. “You really want to use this baby to block Yeflin’s ambitions?”

“I don’t want to do anything of the sort. Echo deserves better than to be used again. But Yeflin decided to make her and her child with a Skaikru the spear point of his campaign to topple Nia. I’ll use her to stop him.”

“Why didn’t you tell me any of this on the trip up here?”

“I didn’t realize that an opportunity existed. Secondhand reports from people who don’t fully understand how the clans work or know anything of the situation inside the Azgeda missed a lot of what was happening.”

“Is there any outcome you would,” Clarke searched for a word, not sure what exactly she was offering, if she was offering anything at all, “prefer?”

“Of course. Echo and her baby live, rules are followed, Yeflin looks the fool and loses face for making such a big fuss over it all.”

Clarke felt relief and regret all at once. “I can’t guarantee that.”

“I know. I have contingencies. As does he.” Roan stood, preparing to leave. “Just keep me informed.”

Clarke sighed tiredly. “My mother hoped that this baby was a good omen. A sign that our people could make a new life here on Earth.”

He smiled down at Clarke, and dropped a comforting hand on her shoulder. “I hope so, too, goat. But,” and his voice was at once sympathetic and full of warning, “I smuggled the Wanheda into the Azgeda Citadel on the eve of the first child’s birth. Clashing omens. Not a good sign.”

Then he nodded at Duncan, they wished Echo well and exited the room.

The next hours passed slowly. Echo didn’t have much energy or focus for anything but the next wave crashing through her, forcing her cervix open to allow for the delivery of her child. Bellamy sat quietly with her and told her stories about growing up on the Ark. He told her stories about space, and weightlessness, and the beauty of the starlit dark. He told her about their first days on the ground, how extraordinary it all was, the verdant green, the phosphorous plants and insects, the smells and tastes and sounds of the forest experienced for the first time by teens who had only known machinery and metal and plastic and the recorded sounds of water and wildlife.

Echo’s sisters drifted in and out, sat for a time, stroked her hair or held her hand, then left to make way for another. Eventually Bellamy left in search of some food, someone brought in a few racks of candles as the sun dipped low in the western sky, and Clarke took the opportunity to do another quick exam, blood pressure, pulse, heart and dilation. “Almost there, Echo. Your blood pressure hasn’t changed, and there’s only a tiny ridge left on one side of your cervix, about a half a centimeter on the other.”

“Good. I think.” Echo sighed, dropping her head back into the pillows she was propped on. “I’m tired, Clarke. And the pushing hasn’t even begun. I think I’m regretting not having that surgery after all,” she smiled weakly, trying to make it a light joke.

“This next part will be much, much shorter,” Clarke assured her, trying not to worry that Echo did look tired. Reminding herself that all laboring mothers looked exhausted. It was called ‘labor’ for fucking good reasons, after all. “I promise,” she added.
Echo gasped as the wave of another contraction hit her. Clarke offered Echo her own hand, and then struggled to keep her mouth closed as her fingers were twisted and ground together in Echo’s powerful grip. The strong hands of a woman raised to the sword, raised to tend horses.

“Ah, shit,” Echo said as it passed and her grip eased. “That one was so bad I think I pissed myself.”

Clarke frowned, then laughed a little. “Let me check again. I don’t think it’s pee. I think your water finally broke.”

Not only had the amniotic sac finally torn, that last contraction had opened all but the tiniest sliver along one side of Echo’s cervix. Clarke could also feel the baby’s head, fully engaged now in the birth canal.

“Bellamy! Octavia!” Clarke called out the door. “We need you.”

He burst through the door a few seconds later, “Now?”

“Very soon. Let’s get Echo on the birthing stool, okay?”

Octavia arrived just in time to help settle Echo on the low, u-shaped seat.

Andromeda was hard on her heels. “Echo?” she asked, “Can you feel the baby’s head?”

When Echo looked at her blankly, Andromeda smiled gently and crouched in front of her youngest sibling, “with your hand, baby girl. Can you feel your son’s head?”

Echo reached down, then looked up at her sister in surprise, a broad smile of amazement on her face and light in her eyes. “I can,” she said. “I can feel his head. I think he has hair,” and then she laughed.

“Okay,” Clarke straightened up and held out their one, precious stethoscope. “Octavia? You got this now?”

Octavia took the stethoscope and said, “I got it.” Then she wrapped her arms around Clarke in a fierce hug. “Thank you,” she whispered. “I’m going to be okay.”

Clarke hugged her back, then a sharp cry from Echo signaled another very strong contraction, and Andromeda touched Clarke’s arm. “We have to go now.”

Clarke nodded, and gave Octavia her last instructions, knowing she didn’t need them but unable to stop herself. “When you can, keep checking on her pulse, even her blood pressure. You’ll have to perform the D&C as quickly as you can once he’s born. As soon as you’ve done that, I can hook up a transfusion to make up for the blood loss.”

Clarke looked back at the door, wishing she could stay. Bellamy was sitting on another low stool behind Echo, holding her steady between his long legs. Octavia was on her knees in front of them, her hands resting on Echo’s belly, looking up into her face. They had this, Clarke assured herself. They were all Echo needed right now. They would have to be. She slipped out and quietly closed the door.
Clarke stood at the closed door for a long breath, in and out, telling herself to let go. There was nothing more she could do to help until Octavia removed the placenta. After another deep breath, she turned and headed for the eating area. The waiting was mostly over, but the difficult part was just beginning. She should eat and drink while she could.

Duncan came to sit beside her at the table. “You doing okay?” he asked, bumping her shoulder with his.

“I’m worried. I’m tired. I’m frustrated. I’m angry.” Suddenly the morbid humor of it all struck her and she laughed quietly as she stared at her empty hands on the tabletop. “You know. Pretty much the same as every other crisis since earthfall.”

“We did a very poor job of welcoming you and your people home,” he said. “It was not our best selves you met then.”

“And you met a bunch of wild and terrified teenagers. Not our best selves either.”

Duncan covered her hand with his strong, warm one. “You always do your very best, Clarke. It’s who you are.”

“Thanks,” she said, bumping him back. “I appreciate the vote of confidence.”

He tilted his head and gestured with his chin. “What do you think she’s up to?”

Clarke looked in the direction he was indicating and saw Sera’s oldest daughter, a girl of eleven or so, leaning up against the door to Echo and Bellamy’s room.

“Trying to figure out what’s happening? Making sure I didn’t crawl back through the window?”

Duncan chuckled quietly and Clarke finished her meal while they sat in companionable silence. She was sipping at her second glass of lukewarm tea when the girl lurking at the bedroom door turned to the room, hopping in excitement and calling happily, “I think the baby’s here!”

Clarke checked her watch and discovered nearly forty minutes had passed, and then into the stillness that had fallen with the girl’s announcement, they all heard the sharp cries of a newborn. The tension around the room let go with an almost audible ‘whump’ and the outburst of excited, relieved cheers and laughter rose to almost deafening levels. Clarke rose to her feet on the tide of everyone else’s relieved joy, feeling as if all the prior tension had spiraled in and taken up residence in her own belly. It was all on Octavia now.

Duncan looked up at her, and nodded in understanding and support. He’d listened to her review her notes every night on the trail. He knew what was coming.

Aware that she’d only have a few more minutes to get ready, Clarke rushed for the privy and then washed and meticulously scrubbed her hands exactly the way her mother had taught her. After that she collected her equipment and Echo’s sister Sefona, who had already agreed to serve as the first blood donor. They took their post at the bedroom door and Clarke checked her watch again. Ten more minutes had passed. She felt her heart begin to hammer in her chest. A person could bleed out in ten minutes.

The door jerked open and Bellamy appeared, “Clarke! Now!” he snapped.
“Wait!” cried Andromeda, holding out her arm to block Clarke’s path. “Is the afterbirth complete?”

“No! Clarke?!” He looked at her, his chest heaving like he’d already been running hard for too long.

“Then you can’t pass!” Andromeda said.

“I will break your fucking arm,” Bellamy said to her, surprisingly calm and clear. “Let Clarke through.”

Clarke didn’t give the shocked Andromeda time to react, simply ducking under her outstretched arm and pulling Sefona with her.

Octavia and Bellamy had shifted Echo back to the bed, where she rested propped on pillows and holding her son in her arms. She was running her fingers gently along his face and head, down his arms to his tiny hands and back again, murmuring a string of crooning words as he snuffled and whimpered with his new lungs, a gut-twisting contrast to her long, red-streaked legs sprawled wide over sheets drenched scarlet with her blood. Octavia was kneeling between them, the muscles of her shoulders trembling with effort and mindlessly repeating ‘shit, shit, shit, shit’ under her breath. There was a frighteningly large pool of deep crimson blood on the floor below the kicked aside birthing stool.

“There’s so much blood,” Sefona whispered, aghast. “So much!”

“Right. She needs more. Right now,” Clarke said, dragging Sefona to Echo’s side. “Bellamy, a chair and a place to put my tools.”

She got Sefona seated and then quickly sank the needle, finding a vein on her first effort, thank every god she’d ever heard of. Still moving as quickly as care allowed, she got the tube set, and handed it to Sefona. “Hold this. Hand above your heart. Higher.”

Then she turned to Echo. Her breath hitched painfully in her throat and panic raced under her skin when she felt how loose Echo’s wrist had become, felt the veins roll under her fingers, felt how slow and thready Echo’s pulse was. It took her four tries to find a vein that would take the needle. Echo flinched, met Clarke’s eyes only once, and then looked back at her son, brushing her lips across his downy head. Bellamy was at her side again, his attention entirely on her interaction with the infant in her arms. Their infant. Their son.

Clarke finally allowed herself one, deep shaky breath after she got the transfusion flowing. Then she moved to Octavia’s side. “How’s it going?” she asked quietly.

“It’s so fucking slippery, Clarke,” Octavia whispered back. “So gods-damned slippery.”

“Do you need me to take a turn?”

“I’ve got one of the two major veins tied off, but the other is a fucking stupid bitch.”

“Okay. I’m going to cut the cord shorter, get it out of our way.”

“No!” Octavia’s voice was with sharp with alarm. “It’s a fucking fire hose.”

“Okay! I won’t touch it.”

Suddenly Octavia’s shoulders relaxed. “Got it!” she hissed triumphantly. “Tied off. Hand me the smallest scalpel we’ve got.”
Less than twenty seconds later they eased the placenta out. It tore a few of the smaller capillaries as it came free, but once the placenta was detached the blood flow to Echo’s uterus finally eased.

Clarke deposited the stubborn organ into a waiting bowl, marveling briefly at its size and weight, then turned her attention back to Octavia. “Rest for a few minutes. Get some water. Ask for more candles. Lots more candles. It’s getting dark in here. I’ll check for any tears.”

Octavia nodded and rose shakily to her feet. Her arms were smeared red well past her elbows, she had blood splatters all over her face, and her trousers below her knees were stained dark and glistening.

“Bellamy,” Clarke asked, even as she focused her eyes on her current task, “how’s the baby?”

“John,” he said, with a heavy rasp in his voice. “His name is John Blake.”

“Kom Azgeda,” Echo added, her voice reassuringly stronger. “John Blake Kom Azgeda.”

“He’s good, Clarke,” Bellamy said. “A little smaller than Octavia was, but just as strong.”

“Did you remember the Apgar test?”

“Yeah. He’s fine. Six and Ten.”

Right on cue the baby, John, began to mewl, and Echo hummed tunelessly to him.

Clarke felt Octavia return. “Can you thread a needle for me? Just have one small repair. Two stitches I think.”

“Got it.”

“Echo? How are you?” Clarke asked.

“Tired. Happy.”

“Sefona?” Clarke glanced quickly at Echo’s sister.

“I’m good. Definitely feeling the pull though.”

“Who’s next on our list?”

“Andromeda.”

“Andromeda?” Clarke called out, her attention still on the needle in her hands. “You ready? As soon as I’ve got this let’s switch out, okay?”

“I’m here,” Andromeda came closer to the bed, drawn by the increasingly fussy baby. “Let’s get him washed up and started suckling, shall we?”

With her sisters all pitching in, they soon had Echo shifted into clean bedding, a fresh slip, and the worst of the blood mopped away. Now she was resting quietly, blood flowing between Andromeda and herself as they curved over the baby, whispering praises to him and to each other, or leaning back to let the next group of visiting family take a peek at their newest member. Octavia took the opportunity to slip away and wash and change into fresh clothes.

Clarke went to wash her own hands, catching Duncan’s eyes on her way to the lone basin with running water. “Did the message get out?” she asked him in a low voice.
“The girl ran as soon as we heard the baby. Her mother slipped away minutes after you forced your way inside.”

“Forced?”

“Well, that sounds more dramatic than ‘ducked’ right? And that is how the story will be reported. ‘Roan’s mystery woman forced her way in’.”

“Not…?”

“No. Not yet, anyway.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I can’t. But even Sera isn’t ready yet to broadcast that she helped shield the Wanheda’s presence. That could result in Hector being called to account, or even charged with treason, and she and her children would suffer then.”

“So what now?”

“Not sure. It’s a judgment call, could go either way. Depends on who carries the news to Nia first, and how, I think.”

Clarke thanked him, and then returned to her patients. Echo’s color was better, her pulse was steady and while her blood pressure was still low, it seemed stable enough to do without another donor, at least for the time being. Baby John, a tiny pink creature with a crest of long, silky black hair that stood straight up off his head was rooting away at his mother’s breast, and his exhausted, besotted parents couldn’t do much more than grin drunkenly at each other.

Clarke plopped down next to Octavia, who was settled on the floor under the rapidly darkening window and eating a sandwich. “You did awesome, you know,” she told her.


“And John,” Clarke added, and they both laughed quietly.

Clarke closed her eyes, letting herself doze for the first time since Octavia had roused her before dawn. She was drifting along in a waking dream of riding through a mountain’s high meadows, when she heard Bellamy call her name and felt Octavia shaking her shoulder.

She staggered to her feet, shaking her head to clear away the flowers and the clouds. “What?”

The room had grown dim again, only a few candles flickering low. Bellamy was on his feet, John cradled against his chest. The baby looked so small in Bellamy’s big hands. Bellamy’s eyes were darker than ever against his suddenly waxy skin. He looked down at Echo, his mute appeal all the more terrifying for his silence.

“What’s happening?” Clarke asked, rushing to bend over Echo, reaching for her wrist, keeping her voice calm and steady, just like she’d trained to do.

“My chest,” Echo whispered. “My chest hurts. Something is running up my spine and my jaw aches like fire.”

Clarke had never experienced her blood turning to ice before, so she hadn’t known that the point of
the metaphor was that it hurt like bloody hell. Icicles were poking through her veins from the top of her head to the soles of her feet. A tiny little part of her brain knew it was because she’d stopped breathing, and it was hypoxia setting in. That was the part that kickstarted her lungs.

“Octavia? Hand me the stethoscope and then get the blood pressure cuff set up, okay? Then go find Duncan. Get some damn light in here!”

It was hard to listen at first. The noise of the voice inside Clarke’s head shrieking ‘Heart attack! Heart attack! Echo is having a heart attack!’ was much too loud.

“Clarke?” Duncan’s steady voice was unexpectedly calming. “What can I do?”

“You have all our bags? I need the one my mom sent with Roan. Inside it is a small black case with a zipper, about the size of your hand. I need the whole bag, but I need that case first.”

The portable ECG reader confirmed Clarke’s worst fears, and repeated readings didn’t change the outcome. Echo, who was now drifting in and out of consciousness, was definitely having a heart attack. It was the kind for which the only treatment protocol was pain medication, waiting and praying, if you had anyone or anything to pray to.

She’d just finished explaining what was happening to Bellamy and Andromeda when she heard Octavia cry out, “Echo!”

Echo had stopped breathing.

They started CPR immediately, Octavia breathing and Clark working on chest compressions. Clarke was on the bed, straddling Echo and reminding herself that the rib cage could take an incredible pounding, when Echo finally gasped and opened her eyes.

Clarke stumbled off of Echo, nearly falling but for Lincoln catching her. “Where did you come from?” she gasped.

“Things are,” he paused, “getting complicated. It’s possible we may need to move Echo to safety, and quickly. Can we do that?”

“What? God, no!”

“In the wagon? If we set up a pallet?”

“Holy shit, Lincoln. She just had a fucking heart attack!”

“What the hell?” Bellamy was suddenly beside her. “What the fuck is going on?”

Lincoln met his eyes. "There are rumors. That the Wanheda is in the city. Follwing her lover, Bellamy Blake. That she helped him break Nia's rules about his wife's childbirth. That she interfered in Echo’s labor. That she did it to save her lover’s mutant, half-space-born son. And then she let Echo die.”

Clarke thought she had seen all possible stages and versions of Bellamy Blake in a rage. She was wrong. He actually seemed to swell, until it felt to Clarke that he was towering over Lincoln. His voice was soft, so soft and yet the rumble of it filled the room. “Who is saying this?” he asked. “Yeflin? Is that son of a bitch saying this?”

Inside Clarke’s head, every single warning noise they’d had on the Ark – bells, whistles, horns, drums, beeps, klaxons – were all going off at once.
Bellamy was glaring around the room, in desperate search of an enemy to fight. Lincoln was all coiled muscle, ready to hurl himself into the path of whatever danger presented itself. All three of Echo’s sisters, Andromeda, Sefona, and Dana were standing and reaching for the weapons they weren’t wearing inside their own quarters, inside Nia’s palace, inside the Azgeda citadel. Andromeda’s eldest daughter, a serious child of seven or eight, was clutching baby John, large against her small torso, her eyes wide and wary.

“Oh, fuck!” Octavia cried. “Clarke, she’s seizing!”

Time stopped telescoping and instead slammed into itself, events ricocheting off each other so quickly Clarke could barely track them.

She rushed back to Echo’s side, couldn’t find a pulse and began to climb back onto the bed. “Epinephrine,” she said to Octavia. “There’s one dose in the bag. Get it now. Along with the big needle.”

Jason appeared at the door, calling for Lincoln. Echo’s sisters rushed after them, Bellamy on their heels.

Andromeda’s daughter retreated to the chair by the window, her hold on her cousin steady and her expression newly fierce.

Octavia was back at Clarke’s side, “Got it. What now?”

“Hand it here.” Clarke took the loaded needle, positioned herself above Echo and drove it straight into the muscle of her heart, depressing the syringe. And nothing happened.

Clarke blinked away panicked tears as she tossed the syringe aside and bent to resume cardiac compression, whispering, “Come on, Echo. You’re the Ice Princess. You are the toughest bitch on the station. You are not going to die on me. Not here. Not now. John needs you. Bellamy needs you. I need you…You have to take care of them Echo, I can’t do it alone. I can’t. Echo, please. Come on. Please. Don’t die.”

She kept up her rhythmic pressing, kept swearing, kept begging until her eyes blurred completely and finally someone’s warm hands closed around her shoulders and Duncan lifted her up and away.

“It’s over, Clarke,” he said. “She’s gone.”
Duncan leaned down, brushed Echo’s hair back from her face, and moved her arms into a more natural looking pose, before shaking out a light blanket and covering her to her breast. Clarke just stood and stared and tried to understand.

Echo had been alive. They’d managed the delivery. They’d stopped her bleeding. They’d given her more blood to make up for what she’d lost. She was holding her baby, laughing at his tiny toes, smiling at her husband, drunk on relief and happiness. And now… she wasn’t. Clarke kept running over the steps in her head. What had she missed? When had she missed it? Could she go back, do it over, get it right? The baby. Where was the baby?

“John,” Clarke said, ignoring her wet face and dripping nose, “Where’s John? Where’s the baby?”

“Right here,” Bellamy said from the window seat. “I’ve got him. He’s safe for now.”

Clarke nodded, relieved but wondering vaguely why Bellamy sounded so angry.

Then she turned to look for Duncan. She felt hollow and dull, and like her head and her heart were as empty as Echo’s must be. “What now?” she asked the space where she thought Duncan had been standing.

“Now we run for it,” Roan answered from the doorway.

“What?” Clarke couldn’t make any sense of what he’d just said. Or why he’d said it. Or where in the hell he’d come from.

“Nia already told Bellamy what he has to do to save the baby. Her conditions haven’t changed. He has to get his son out of the Citadel, and then he belongs to his father…”

Roan was still talking. Maybe he hadn’t heard her? Clarke looked back at Echo, wondering why she wasn’t sitting up, listening to the conversation.

“How long do we have?” Lincoln asked.

Clarke turned to him in surprise too, and slowly realized the room was full of people again. Duncan. Bellamy. Roan. Lincoln and Octavia. Andromeda and her husband, Sefona and hers, Jason and two of his teenaged children, Hector and his oldest daughter – there was hardly any room left to stand. She wondered in a vague way when that had happened. Wondered why she hadn’t noticed. She looked back at Echo, who appeared to be sleeping, though her face seemed terribly slack and her skin more translucent, more grey than Clarke could ever remember seeing it before.

“Not long,” Roan said. “Dawn at best, only a few more hours at worst. As soon as news gets out that Echo has died, Yeblin’s mob will demand the mutant space-child who killed her. Blood for blood.”

“But that’s not fair!” Octavia objected. “That’s not even what killed her! The fucking Mountain Men killed her! And he’s perfect! The baby is perfect!”

“They won’t understand that,” Roan said to her, “and they don’t care anyway.”

“So we run,” Bellamy said.
“We run, and,” Roan said with a faintly rueful shrug, “we fight,”


No one seemed to hear her. She wondered if she was the one who’d died.

“Yeflin,” snarled Bellamy. “He’s behind this, isn’t he?”

“Yes. Coming straight for you and your son, I’m afraid.”

“Fine. I’ve been looking forward to killing that bastard for two months.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?” Bellamy demanded, his voice rising with his temper.

Octavia moved to his elbow and reached for John, pulling him gently from Bellamy’s grasp. “Give me the baby, Bell.”

“I mean we don’t have time for you to take him on,” Roan said. “I give you just over a fifty/fifty chance anyway. Youth and anger can be a plus, but it can also be a weakness. And he’s alive because he’s strong and cunning and like all men of the clans, he was born with a blade in his hands. You weren’t.”

“He has to die!” Bellamy’s voice cracked with emotion. “That’s the blood for blood that honors Echo!”

“Yes. It will,” Roan assured him. “And Duncan and I are going to do it.”

“It’s my right! She’s my wife!”

It seemed to Clarke, watching from her spot somewhere near the ceiling that Roan was somehow right in Bellamy’s face, without ever having left the doorway, which he was now fully blocking, his arms crossed over his chest, his stance filling the frame.

“Son,” he said, his voice as heavy as his frown, “this is not an arena and we have no time for a duel. This is political assassination under cover of a riot and it is the price of your son’s life and your escape. All our lives.”

“It won’t be a duel,” Bellamy spat. “I’m going to shoot him in the head.”

“No,” said Roan shook his head sharply, slashing his hand through the air for emphasis. “No guns inside the Citadel. That’s one of Nia’s conditions.”

“One of the conditions?” asked Hector.

Roan glanced at him from under his brows. “Yeflin is only one name on a short list.”

Hector and Jason paled for the first time, but Echo’s sisters smiled like death. Their lips pulled taut over their teeth, their nostrils flaring, their eyes burning, they smiled Valkyrie smiles, perilous and bloodthirsty.

Their expressions chilled Clarke’s breath and made her lungs ache. She remembered that Echo was dead. That Andromeda and Sefona had lost their sister. That Bellamy had lost his wife. He’d loved her. Maybe not the great love of his life, but love all the same. Clarke had always suspected that he did, but now she knew. He’d loved her and he’d lost her and Clarke had failed them, failed Echo,
and now all he had was their son.

“I’ll take the kids, pick up Emon and his kids along the way,” Andromeda’s husband said. “We’ll get the horses ready and meet you at the barn beyond the west palace gate. From there it’s the shortest distance to the Citadel wall.”

“We’ll need one more horse for Bellamy,” Lincoln said. “I’m assuming you have their horses and gear?” and he nodded at Duncan and Roan. “And Clarke’s, too?”

“We do.”

“Keep the wagon and the team then.”

“We’ll toss in some extras, make it an even trade,” said Andromeda’s husband. He and Lincoln sealed the deal with quick arm clasp, and then he left the room, the teens jogging after him.

From there, instructions and tasks were parceled out until only Clarke was left with Roan and Bellamy. And Echo’s body. “Bellamy?” she said.

He’d need to talk to someone. Need to be with someone. Wasn’t that always what her mother the doctor was saying? That people needed to take the time to process their hurts? He had just endured a terrible hurt.

“Not now, Clarke,” he replied, turning away from her. “I need a minute alone with Echo.” His voice was hoarse, and broke when he added, “Please?”

Roan took her elbow and guided her out, pulling the door gently closed behind them. “That will have to come much later, Wanheda.”

“Don’t call me that,” she said reflexively, her head still back in the room with Bellamy, wondering how hard he would take this. How much he would bleed before any of them knew.

“I am calling you that,” Roan’s voice hardened. “I need you to be her again, Clarke. Bellamy and the baby need the Wanheda now. You need to wake up and fight. You need to be ready to kill, because Yeflin is ready to kill them first if you can’t protect them.” Roan stood in front of her and ducked his head to catch her eyes, and called lightly, almost an incantation, “Come out to play, Wanheda. Your people need you now.”

Clarke’s lungs pinched tight. She shook her head. “You’re a fucking asshole, you know that?”

“Yes, I do.” He smiled very sweetly at her. “Fortunately, you like fucking assholes like me. Come out, come out wherever you are, Wanheda. Time to play with fire again.”

Clarke glared at him, blinking back a fresh rush of tears. In her bones, she’d known that if she stayed in the Citadel it would come to this. That many would die to save her precious few. In the plaza yesterday (only yesterday?) she’d had that split second to run before Echo saw her, grabbed her, held her with hope and need. She stayed, for Echo, for the baby, for Bellamy, and now here she was. The fire calling to her.

She hissed to Roan, “Time to kill, you mean, you fucking motherfucker. Time to burn. I can’t. I won’t. It’s never just one! Never! I won’t burn hundreds to save one more. I’m not her!”

“Yes. You are. You have to be. To save Bellamy. And his son.”

Her face crumpled and she started to cry harder, tears slipping out and a sob stuck in her throat.
Why was Roan doing this to her? They couldn’t depend on her. No one should depend on her. Look at how monumentally she’d failed Echo! “I hate you. I hate you so fucking much,” she said.

“No,” he said, sounding almost angry with her. “You don’t. You don’t hate me at all. But maybe you need to.”

Then he slipped his hands around her head and pulled her in for a kiss. It was a demanding kiss, a hard, carnal kiss, the kind of kiss that Clarke had sometimes recalled deep in the throes of a sleepless night. When she froze, too stunned by this rapid switch in his approach to move, he bit her lip sharply. When she gasped in shock and pain, he pressed in, wet, open-mouthed, obscene and yet, to her creeping horror, disturbingly erotic. Her body responded even while her brain told her to push him off, closed her eyes when she meant to glare, leaned in when her will told her to jerk away. And then, almost before it started, it was over. He pulled away as he held her back.

Still holding her head in his hands, his eyes knowing and his tone insolent, he said, “You did miss me, didn’t you, Wanheda?”

Burning with shame and anger, now she jerked out of his hands, raising hers to smash the smirk off his face, but he caught her wrist and held her off. When she went to sweep his legs, he blocked and spun her, because he was the one who had taught her the leg sweep in the first place, holding her firm against his chest, his forearm an iron bar across her throat.

“All awake now, Wanheda?”

“You fucking son of a bitch,” she hissed, fury dancing across her skin like lightning.

“Yes. But I think you would have liked her.” He dropped his arms and pushed her stumbling forward, even as he stepped back out of her range. “Or, at least, admired her.”

“Where are my blades?” Clarke demanded.

Roan flicked his eyes behind her, “Duncan has them.”

She snatched them out of Duncan’s grip, as she snarled back at Roan. “No guns? Really? You gave up that advantage?”

“Only to the Citadel wall. And Nia promised bowmen, to keep the rooftops clear.”

“You trust her?” she flung at him, incensed that he’d dragged them all into stupid intra-clan battle that she didn’t give a flying fuck about but that could kill them all anyway.

He shrugged. “There are easier and quieter ways to kill us than to let us be slaughtered in the streets of her city while we try to save the helpless, newborn first child from an ignorant mob whipped up by her most powerful political rival. That might piss off others. Here among the Azgeda. In the coalition. Your mother. Or ALIE.”

He paused and cocked his head thoughtfully, even walking around to get a view of her from a different angle.

“What?” Clarke demanded.

“I wish now we hadn’t dyed your hair. I wish you were still blond.”

“Are you joking?” she gasped incredulously, “We went to all that trouble to get it dyed brown and now you wish we hadn’t?” Clarke was nearly spitting she was so mad.
“No, I’m not joking. Given what we’re up against now, I want the Wanheda front and center, a flaming torch in her hand.”

A cough distracted Clarke from launching an ill-considered assault on Roan. She spun to find Andromeda and Sefona watching them. They had pulled on their mail shirts, strapped on their weapons, braided their hair and donned their paint. Their eyes gleamed with fury behind the black on their faces. “Our sister Dana is rallying supporters and allies, getting them into position,” Andromeda said. “And the bowmen are ready.”

“Any news on Yeflin’s forces? On Yeflin himself?”

“There’s movement in the Citadel. They’ve begun massing an angry mob of anti-mutant types along with his core supporters along the south palace wall,” Andromdea shook her head, reminding Clarke of a wild bull she had once seen on her journeys with Roan, getting ready to charge. Her hands were at her sides, her long fingers flexing, ready to rend and tear. “Yeflin’s out there,” Andromdea said, “winding them up. Telling them that the Wanheda is here. That mutant Skaikru men are coming to steal their land and women’s wombs, steal their future children. That if they let Bellamy Blake’s mutant son live, he’ll come back one day and kill them all.”

“You know,” Sefona said thoughtfully, interrupting whatever Roan was going to say next, her glittering eyes cold and appraising as she examined Clarke in her turn, “I have an idea about her hair. If Yeflin fears the Wanheda is here, he should see her, don’t you think?”

Roan brightened immediately. “Can you dye it in the time we have?” he asked.

“No. But, we have the wigs and extensions from the winter festival costumes in a box, don’t we?” She looked at Andromeda with her question. “Those are white, not blond, but enough of them braided in would be dramatic and,” she smiled another terrifying smile, “Wanheda-like.”

Andromeda nodded, Roan snapped, “Do it,” and before Clarke had time to make an objection, or even an observation, it was happening. Within an amazingly short amount of time, Clarke’s hair had grown at least a hand-span longer, spilling loosely down her back, and was much, much thicker and heavier. A small hand mirror showed a high crest, now nearly half-white, half-brown, disappearing into a pair of heavy, thick, half-white and half-brown, scalp-pulling braids before they were tied off, leaving the long, loose tails of coarse white horsehair that dragged over her shoulders. Someone had also smeared on the black paint the clans wore, a solid heavy band across Clarke’s eyes and disappearing into her hairline.

Roan was in front of her again, Bellamy and Duncan by his side, his fierce grin was whiter than ever against his own black paint, smeared across most of his face. “Welcome back, Wanheda,” he bowed surprisingly deeply to her. “Are you ready?”
Running the Gauntlet

The apartment had emptied except for those planning on riding with Bellamy to the edge of the Citadel or beyond.

Clarke slipped towards Echo’s room, wanting to pay her last respects. Echo was lying alone in the place where she had given birth to her son. Where she had died. Her sisters had prepared her for her funeral, tucked flowers in her hair, applied war paint to her face, and placed her sword in her hands. There was a single tall candle burning at each corner of her bed.

Only she wasn’t alone when Clarke entered. Bellamy was sitting beside her, his elbows resting on the mattress, his chin on his fist as he gazed at Echo’s body. Contemplating the end of whatever future he had imagined with his wife.

He must have heard Clarke come in because he looked up and their gazes locked.

“She feared this, you know? From the beginning,” he said, his voice deeper than ever. “That having a child would kill her. Once she knew he was healthy, she chose it anyway.”

“I know,” Clarke said, her own voice sounding faint and thin to her ears.

He rose, the chair scooting back with an agonizingly loud squeal on the tiled floor, and then he bent and pressed his lips to Echo’s brow. As he leaned down something new drew Clarke’s eye. A cord around his neck slipped out from the top of his shirt, carried forward by the weight of the rings he now wore there. Her mother’s rings. Her parents’ rings. And so briefly, too briefly, his and Echo’s rings.

When he straightened up he caught her watching him. Holding her eyes, he slid the cord and its contents back under his shirt. “I’m taking them back to the mountain. Back to your mother,” he said.

Clarke nodded, not trusting herself with any words.

He held her gaze a few seconds longer, his eyes so dark in the flickering candlelight they reminded her of the endless black of space. She couldn’t see anything in them but the last vestiges of the boy who’d told her his mother would be disappointed in him. That everything he touched he destroyed. That he was a monster.

Then he blinked, veiling his emotions once more. He shook his head and ducked his shoulder in what she knew to be an unspoken apology for his inability to talk to her right now. Then he slipped past her and out into the hallway beyond.

“I’m so, so sorry,” she whispered to Echo’s ghost.

Then she followed Bellamy out to the briefing Roan was getting ready to hold.

The smallest children had all been spirited away, safe with friends and family, Nia-supporters all. The younger teens had gone to the stables with Andromeda’s husband, and from there into hiding.

This left more than a dozen family members who had volunteered to face the streets with Bellamy and Roan and the rest of them. This group included some Clarke had come to know, and others whose names and exact kin-relationship Clarke never had quite nailed down. And some she recognized, although she’d never exchanged a word with them. Like Hector’s eldest, his daughter...
with his first wife, now standing next to him with her own sword on her back. Clarke thought she looked so young, too young to be with the fighters, then recalled that she’d been introduced as being seventeen, the same age as Octavia. Clarke wondered when she got so old, wondered if Earth-time moved faster, weighed more heavily than time in space.

“It’s a little more than hour until dawn begins,” Roan began.

“It is?” Clarke said, shocked by the news. “When did it get so late?”

“Yes, it is late,” said Roan. “You were pretty out of it for a while there, goat.” His eyes, behind his paint, and his voice were once more understanding and compassionate. He was a crazy, twisted bastard, and Clarke swore to herself that if he ever kissed her uninvited like that again she would bite off his tongue.

He cleared his throat and restarted his briefing. “I’d like to be at the Citadel wall before full light.” He reached into the sack Clarke had wondered why he was holding and pulled out three clan war masks. He handed one each to Clarke, Bellamy and Octavia. “Everyone wears a mask.”

“Why did you want my hair fixed if I’m wearing a mask?” Clarke asked as she accepted the one he offered her, which turned out to look a lot like a black leather surgical mask and offered about that much of a disguise.


Clarke, along with everyone else, looked at him and wondered what on Earth he was talking about.

“How!” Roan suddenly barked a quick laugh. “I know that one. American Revolutionaries. Tea pitched into Boston Harbor. Taxes or tariffs? Feathers in their hair so that anyone who saw them dump the cargo could claim it was the indigenous tribes who did it.” He grinned happily at Bellamy. “Exactly. This way people can swear they don’t know which of us is which. Except for the Wanheda, of course,” he nodded at Clarke. “You’ll have a torch. And you’re the avatar.”

“How the hell did you know all that history?” Clarke demanded, not wanting to think about her role as avatar. A leader. A killer. A target. The butcher’s goat, leading the sheep to the slaughter.

“American History Textbooks,” Roan said. “They survived oddly well. Good paper.” He looked back at the group, dismissing the diversion. “Because it’s so early, there won’t be many bystanders in the streets, which is good. Of course, it also means anyone who is in the streets is going to be fair game, for one side or the other.”

“Wait. If Clarke has a torch, then who has her back?” Bellamy asked, his brows drawn down in concern. “She’ll be a clear target!”

“Yes. That’s the idea,” Roan agreed. With, thought Clarke, a faint and quite unnecessary whiff of ‘why am I dealing with idiots’ in his expression. “Duncan and I will be with her,” Roan added, speaking more kindly this time, “keeping her as safe as we can. She’s also much better with a sword than she used to be.”

“I thought you were going to be busy assassinating Yeflin, among others.” Bellamy bristled, obviously hearing the same things as Clarke was, and glared at Roan over his crossed arms. “How can you do both? Take him out and protect Clarke?”

Roan shot Clarke a quicksilver glance, which nonetheless conveyed volumes worth of irritation at being questioned by the man she’d dragged him up here to save. Fortunately, he kept his voice patient and he did, unlike any other clan commander she’d ever met, actually answer the question.
“Yeflin will, I’m nearly one hundred percent certain, make straight for the Wanheda. On the not at all misplaced assumption that her champion’s preferred spot is at her right hand.” Roan did allow himself a pause and a sardonic glance between Bellamy and herself before continuing, “Yeflin will also assume that if you are close to her, your son will be too. Then he can take all three of you out in one sweep. Which is why I don’t want you or your infant anywhere near Clarke, and why Duncan and I will be there instead.”

Roan held Bellamy’s gaze until the younger man dropped his eyes and nodded his agreement, or acceptance. One or the other. Clarke knew Roan didn’t give a damn which as long as Bellamy followed his orders.

“What about the anti-mutant mob Yeflin is whipping up?” Clarke asked, partially out of a desire to shift the topic, partially from real concern. These were not the people she wanted to hurt, as much as she feared and distrusted their bigotry. “Whose side are they on? Are they on any side, really, in all this?”

“No ours,” said Roan, enunciating quite firmly.

“Is there any way to tell who is who?” Bellamy asked, pulling on his mask.

“If they take a swing at you? Swing back,” Roan said.

Still looking at Bellamy, he continued, “Your job, and your only job, is to protect your sister and your son. You and Lincoln, together. You two stay with Octavia and the baby, stay in the center back of the wedge as long as you can. But you get them out of the palace, out of the Citadel, and out of Azgeda territory. If any of the rest of us fall, you keep moving.” He stressed the words hard. “And don’t look back. Otherwise Echo died for nothing.”

Bellamy swallowed hard, but he nodded, and put his hand on Octavia’s shoulder. “Got it,” he said.

“Octavia?” Roan said, looking to her next, “You ready for this?”

“Yes,” Octavia answered, and pulled on her mask. Over her face paint it made even her eyes nearly impossible to see. Then she dropped one hand protectively to the back of the sleeping infant now swaddled and secured to her chest, and the other to the hilt of her long knife. Her voice ringing oddly hollow, she declared, “I am.”

“We make for the stables first. The horses should be ready with the rest of our gear. Then we ride fast and hard for the west gate. If the horses aren’t ready, or aren’t there, we run on foot, it’s just over a half a mile. No guns until we’re outside the Citadel walls. Then we can use them, but fire into the air first.”

Clarke suddenly realized that was why the men of her immediate party had looked so oddly unbalanced. All four of them had a rifle wrapped in black fabric secured to their backs.

“Any last questions?” Roan asked.

Everyone shook their heads.

Roan turned to Duncan, who had been standing quietly at his shoulder. Wrapping his hand lightly around the slightly taller man’s neck, he pulled him close to rest their foreheads together for the briefest of moments. Then he tilted his head and kissed him on the mouth, before saying something quick and low in Trigedasleng that Clarke thought, roughly translated, could mean, “on the other side.”
Duncan nodded, his lips curved into the smallest of smiles, one for Roan alone, and answered with the same phrase.

“Masks on,” Roan said over his shoulder, one hand on the latch of the outer door, his machete in the other. “Let’s go.”

He flung the door open, rushed out and came to halt so fast the rest of them got piled up in the doorway. Trying to get out of the sudden crush Clarke realized there were entirely too many people standing around the torch-lit courtyard. By the time they were all sorted out, she guessed there were some twenty-five or thirty more nervously shifting Azgeda, dressed and armed for battle, their masks under their arms but wearing no paint.

“Hello,” Roan said.

Clarke glanced suspiciously at him. There was just that tiniest bit of something in his voice that hinted to her that he wasn’t actually (very) surprised, and may have been even more than a little pleased.

A big man, dark hair greying at his shaved temples, Azgeda tattoos across his cheeks and brow, and with a long forked beard, stepped forward. “I am Nahum,” he said. “I heard Bellamy Blake yesterday in the Queen’s chamber, begging to help his wife, begging for her life.” He was scrutinizing their group as he spoke, and Bellamy pulled off his mask and stepped slightly forward. Nahum nodded in satisfaction and addressed Bellamy directly. “My wife bled out with our last child. Our son was sacrificed outside the walls in winter in exchange for killing her. If I had been there, with her, maybe…” he paused to swallow hard. “I will help you save your son.”

He offered his arm to Bellamy, who accepted it gravely and returned the clasp. “Thank you,” he said.

Then a short, solid woman with a long grey braid stepped forward. “She was my daughter. Her son was perfect.” She nodded. “I will help you, Bellamy Blake.” And she offered her arm.

Another woman, younger and taller stepped forward. “My daughter died, tangled in the cord, before she was completely delivered. I couldn’t get her breathing again. With help, that wouldn’t have happened. I will help you, Bellamy Blake.” She offered her arm.

Another woman. “My child died in the womb. I had to deliver the rotting corpse alone. In pieces. I’ll never conceive another.”

“My daughter died.”

“My sister died.

“My wife died.”

“My child died.”

And one by one the rest stepped forward, retelling their brief histories of the women they had loved and lost, the children sacrificed, and offered their arms to Bellamy.

Clarke looked at the lightening sky, the once bright stars already hazy and growing faint, the dozen people still waiting to introduce themselves, then at Roan. She started to gesture at the crowd, “Don’t we need…”

“Hush,” he whispered, catching her arm and holding it down. “This is important.”
A middle-aged woman came hustling up, a basket in her arms, just as the last volunteer said her piece. “Ribbons,” she panted. “Blue for Nia, yellow for mourning.”

Everyone tied pair on the person standing closest to them. Clarke turned away from Duncan to find Bellamy approaching her. “You okay with this plan?” he asked her in a low voice. “With being the one in front with a target on your head?”

“Yeah,” she lied with a firm nod and an unshaking voice. “I am. It’s what I do.”

“If you die…” he started.

“I won’t,” she cut him off. “It’s a good plan Bellamy. And I’m not so much the target as the human equivalent of a tracking device. They’ll be concentrating on my hair to find you, but you won’t be there.”

“And while they hesitate in confusion, we cut them down.” Roan was back.

“Then it’s on you to keep her safe,” Bellamy declared, looking straight at Roan.

Roan didn’t answer, just bowed his head, accepting the charge.

Bellamy nodded once more, his glance, dark and unfathomable, raking both Clarke and Roan, and then he turned away to find Octavia.

“Your Champion,” said Roan in a low voice, “would die at your side if you let him. Remember that, goat.”

Then, with the sky already a purple-blue, Roan picked up a fresh torch and lit it from the one by the apartment door. With a grand flourish, he offered it to Clarke. “Wanheda.”

She held out her hand.

“Other hand,” he snapped impatiently. “Sword goes in your dominant hand.”

Her glare was wasted because he’d already turned away, his hand on her elbow and picking up his speed until he was pulling her along at a slow jog, the two of them at the head of their now much larger band. “Stay together,” he called back over his shoulder. “As long as you can.”

Clarke had no idea how, but their opponents, the people who stood between them and saving John’s life, knew they were on the move. Or maybe it was just bad luck. Or maybe they’d been waiting or them. But as soon as they approached the narrow gateway into the next courtyard, she heard boots pounding on pavement, heading toward them, the sibilant hiss of steel blades pulled from sheaths.

“Gon op!” cried Roan, in a full-throated command roar she’d never heard from him before.

An answering war cry came from the front, reverberating back along the pavement, bouncing off the solid walls. The people behind her replied to the challenge, their cries meeting the yells of their attackers in what felt like a solid wave of sound.

Duncan to her left, Roan to her right, they burst through and into a clash of steel on steel. Clarke swung her torch in a long backhanded arc, thrusting it across the face of the first masked fighter who came for her, slicing at his arm as he leaned away. He stumbled and her momentum and the press of the people behind her drove her past. She started to turn, but Duncan bellowed ‘forward’ into her ear, half-blocking her attempted spin, half-pushing her onward. Then he pulled away, and
with a quick combination blocked a blow with his hatchet and then drove his sword into a man’s
gut, dropping him where he stood, pulling it free with an easy twist, and then they were past.

It went on like that, block, slash, stab, a swing of her torch, more times than Clarke could count.
And then they poured into the larger open space before the western portal of the palace proper.

It was an obvious choke point. On the far side of the gate was what appeared to be a howling mob
– torches, clubs, swords – while on the inside a group of a dozen very determined looking warriors
faced them. Every single one of them armed with a menacing looking pole arm mounted with a
long curved blade.

Clarke’s heart plummeted to her boots. All their planning, all their care, all these people prepared
to fight and die for Bellamy and his son, and it could all end right here. Those weapons, in the
hands of skilled soldiers, would cut them down as easily as a scythe through wheat at harvest time.
Running through a narrow passage, one arm around her nephew, her other hand on the hilt of her knife, Octavia couldn’t see anything but backs. Bellamy was in front of her, Lincoln behind. To either side of her were Andromeda and Sefona, both them as tall as or taller than Echo.

She glanced down to see John’s tiny face turned toward hers, his dark eyes open and staring, his little forehead all wrinkled in a way that looked so much like worry but was probably gas. Her breath rattled in her chest with more tears anyway, even after she thought she’d already cried herself out, already wept all she could for Bellamy, for John, for herself. For Echo most of all. She should have remembered that heartbreak took a long time to heal.

In seconds she was through the narrow passage and out into a more open area. Her view shifted and improved as the people around her spread out into a better defensive cordon. Ahead she could see Clarke, shining at the front of the column. Transformed into the Wanheda, already a figure more of legend than a real, bleeding person, Clarke’s white hair gleamed gold in the light of the torch she was swinging like a club. She seemed to cut through the mob in front of them like a knife through butter, pulling further ahead as their formation began to stretch out.

Duncan and Roan were weaving back and forth around her, front and back, side to side, cutting down anyone who didn’t get out of the way fast enough.

But it seemed to Octavia that people were actually trying to get out of the way. To Octavia’ surprise, Roan had been right. Even here, hundreds of miles from Mt. Weather and the Drop Ship, people were afraid of Clarke. Of who and what they believed she’d become. Grown people, warriors raised in a fierce and unforgiving world, were falling back and away as the Skaikru Wanheda passed them by.

It was a distant feeling of surprise, of course. Too much of Octavia’s concentration was focused on keeping her footing and staying close to Bellamy to leave much of her attention available for anything else, but all the same it was real.

The sounds all around them were so loud. Trapped by all the stone and brick of the walls and buildings, the din was almost unbearable. The clash of metal against metal, the thud of boots and bodies, the grunts and yells and war cries filled the air.

The baby, however, bound snugly to her chest, was silent.

Octavia felt the crowd around her slow, wondered what was happening, and then realized they had reached the palace gates. She could sense as much as see and hear that the mob outside the palace walls was far bigger than the few score opponents they’d already faced on the inside.

Between them and the gate were a dozen more warriors, each one armed with a long curved blade mounted on a long pole.

Fear, which Octavia hadn’t really felt until now, wrapped tightly around her spine and started to reach for her throat. If those warriors were coming for Bellamy, for John, they were so, so screwed.

Abruptly the dozen warriors split into two columns, opening up a path to the gate and closing in around Clarke and her point guards as they ran through.

“It’s Dana,” Sefona gasped, leaning into Octavia and Lincoln. “Dana and her most loyal guards.”
Dana, Echo’s third sister and Queen Nia’s second, led her heavily armored guard straight through the gate, their long, wickedly-terrifying weapons extended, and quickly opened up a space for Clarke to lead her forces through.

On the other side of the palace wall, the fight spread out still further, breaking out into knots that spilled down the side streets and alleys, and pulling some of their most recent comrades away from them.

Octavia quickly realized that both Yeflin supporters and Nia supporters had been outside the gate. Realized that the size and noise and writhing movement of the waiting mob was because they were already fighting it out even before the Wanheda burst into their midst.

Clarke was still at the point of their charge, swinging her own sword in tandem with the torch in a fearsome combination, Duncan and Roan sweeping around her.

And then, as Octavia watched, Clarke stumbled. She fell to her knees, though she somehow managed to keep the damn torch aloft. “Drop the torch,” Octavia yelled, uselessly, into the sea of noise, “Claaaarke! Drop it!”

At least two attackers saw the opportunity and started to rush in, their blades raised high. Clarke raised her own blade in a nearly useless defensive maneuver against the weight and power coming towards her. Frantic, Octavia searched the backs in front of her for Bellamy, willing him to see this, to launch himself forward, to save her. Lincoln found him first, but Lincoln grabbed for his arm, preventing Bellamy from dashing off.

Octavia searched wildly through the crowd for another glimpse of Clarke, certain of the worst, and was just in time to see Duncan and Roan swoop back in. One of the attackers was down, the other retreating with an injured arm and Duncan was hauling Clarke back to her feet, towing her along until she was running on her own again.

The downed man tried to get to his feet, but like all his comrades before him, he was struck down again almost immediately. Other warriors, blue and yellow ribbons fluttering as they passed, sliced and thrust, punched and kicked him down again. Or simply ran right over him.

Octavia was so busy craning her neck to see what was happening that she stumbled into her own bodyguards, but Lincoln caught her, pushed her back onto her own feet, and kept them running.

Far out in front now, Duncan in particular was a marvel. Under the quickly brightening, sky Octavia could see that blood was literally flying off his blades as he hacked his way forward, axe and sword in his hands. His face was locked in a frozen mad grin as he tore through the opposing mob.

Two men jumped him, and he actually shook them off, like a horse shaking off water. One leapt again for his back, and in a move too fast and sinuous to even track Duncan swung his attacker around his torso and into a bar hold, ducked his head and bit off his attacker’s ear. He pulled his head back and flung the bit of bloody flesh aside with his teeth, leaving his mouth streaked red.

As she watched the severed ear fly, a kaleidoscope of images crashed into Octavia’s brain. Crowded fighting and fleeing in the woods and in the tunnels below Mt. Weather, Lincoln with blood in his mouth in the light of their flashlight, the high, piercing whine of the control that dropped them to their knees. Octavia realized with mounting horror that what she was witnessing was a Reaper in full pursuit. Long cleared of the Red or not, this fight, this scrabbling, running, bloody fight had unlocked something deep inside Duncan, that had been buried, pushed back, denied, but not forgotten. Not gone.
A scuffle immediately beside her snapped her head around and she danced sideways as Lincoln and Bellamy converged to pull her away while Sefona, who wielded a battle-axe rather than a sword, hacked her would-be attacker down.

They kept moving, fighting, and running until they came around a corner and entered the open square in front of the barn that was their immediate destination.

Their column stretched out even more as the frontrunners, still led by Clarke and her demon protectors, pulled still further ahead. Octavia cried out again in warning and dismay when she saw that twenty-five meters in front of them, the path to the stable was blocked by a score or more fighters, all raising their swords and yelling bloodcurdling cries as they saw their targets approach.

Octavia immediately recognized the big man in the center as Yeflin. The western sky ahead of them was a cool pale blue, but the rosy gold of the first rays of the rising sun lit Yeflin’s face, his mane of thick grey hair almost shining in it, his distinctive tattoos clear and sharp in the bright dawn light. He dropped his shoulders, preparing to charge and then Roan raced past Clarke, his bellow of, “Duncan!” carrying even above the din of battle.

Roan and Duncan came at Yeflin from both sides. Roan reached him first, ducked and swung low. Yeflin spun away, right into Duncan’s high slash at his neck. Roan circled round and drove his machete two-handed into Yeflin’s back so hard the point came out his chest. The big man fell heavily to his knees, dropping his sword and reaching for the blade protruding from his breast, when Duncan swung around, his sword extended in a two-handed grip, and with the full force of his weapon, sliced cleanly through Yeflin’s neck.

Clarke reached them just as the man’s head fell at her feet. Roan seized her torch arm, spun her toward the crowd and then yanked her up so far she was nearly on her toes. Then he raised his own sword and bellowed, “Jus don giv jus op!”

Around them, the crowd screamed.

Still gripping Clarke’s arm, Roan thrust her torch into Yeflin’s body, holding it steady and still until his clothes began to smoke and then caught fire. Then, Roan turned his head to say something to Clarke and together they dropped the torch on the headless corpse.

Meanwhile, Dana and her guards had engaged the rest of the men around Yeflin and the courtyard was beginning to be littered with the bodies of those cut down.

Andromeda and Sefona had left Octavia’s side and run to the barn door, where they were banging on it and yelling to whomever had barred it from the inside.

Then the doors rolled open and their whole group surged forward. Bellamy and Lincoln were on either side of Octavia now, their hands under her elbows nearly lifting her off her feet as they propelled her headlong into the stable.

Inside the barn everything was unfolding in a sort of controlled chaos. More than two-dozen horses were saddled and waiting in open stalls, pawing, fretting, and blowing in alarm. Octavia spotted her horse and screamed at Bellamy to take her in that direction. With all the noise he couldn’t hear her so she reached up and knocked off her stupid, heavy mask. This time Lincoln heard her and steered her that way.

Lincoln slipped behind her, grabbed her by he waist and lifted her and the baby up high enough to plant Octavia’s butt directly into the saddle. Once she was properly settled with her feet in the stirrups and her hands on the reins, she checked again on the infant at her chest. He had, most
improbably it seemed to her, gone back to sleep. After quickly reassuring herself that he was still breathing and that his face was clear, she realized that his tiny little body was a freaking heat pump and was at least part of the reason why sweat was now streaming down the sides of her face. Octavia looked around, trying to make sense of the scene. From the back of her horse, and without her stupid mask, she had a much better view.

Clarke was mounted now, her horse doing anxious little half hops as activity swirled around them. Bellamy and Lincoln were also mounted, as were Andromeda, Sefon, Andromeda’s husband, and Dana along with half her guard and five or ten others Octavia couldn’t fully identify.

Of the people planning to ride out, only Roan and Duncan remained on the ground. Duncan was still in the courtyard, heavily engaged with two men but more than holding his own, despite being down to one blade. As she watched, Roan slammed into one of the attackers from behind and knocked him flat, pausing to kick him in the jaw to keep him down. Then he jammed a dagger into the neck of the other and let it fall with the body. He grabbed Duncan’s shirt and yelled something into his face Octavia couldn’t make out.

Whatever it was seemed to get through to him, because Duncan jerked free and turned for the barn and the horse that someone with blue and yellow ribbons was holding for him. Roan followed behind, stooping to retrieve his dagger as he came.

As soon as he’d swung one-armed up onto his horse, Roan cried, “Gyon au!”

He spun for the courtyard, pushing his mount into a canter almost as soon as they cleared the doors, the rest of them streaming after him. Octavia’s last sight in the courtyard was Yeflin’s bloody head, resting awkwardly on the ground beside his gently smoldering body.

With Yeflin’s death the heart seemed to have gone out of their attackers, because they encountered no more opposition. Instead, what people were around and about jumped hastily backwards into crossroads, alleyways or walls to clear their path.

The guards at the Citadel gates must have heard them coming, because they were pulling up the portcullis as they arrived, Roan at the head of their group, Andromeda and her sisters bringing up the rear.

A few hundred paces on the other side of the wall, two mounted men and a small string of packhorses galloped out into the road beside them, prompting Duncan to come tearing up and take a hearty swing with his sword. He might have hit one of the riders but for Roan, who drove his horse in between them, forcing Duncan off course. Then Roan pushed to the front again and raised his arm, signaling to the whole party to slow down and then, finally, come to a halt.

While the rest of them were coming in to form a tight enough group they could hear each other, Roan swung around them to catch the reins of Duncan’s horse down close to the bit. He’d already noticed that Duncan, his shoulders still heaving he was breathing so hard, was looking back at the main gate, closely scrutinizing a rapidly mounting group that was swirling around and apparently contemplating some sort of final sortie. With his hand on Duncan’s horse, Roan continued his circle until they were both on the far side of the group, their company between Duncan and the gate, effectively blocking Duncan’s view.

Roan turned to a man Octavia hadn’t realized was riding with them, and offered his arm. “Nahum. Thank you. Without you and your people, we could not have escaped the Citadel.”

The rest of them echoed his words in a confusing babble, while Bellamy rode forward to offer Nahum his arm and his personal thanks. Then Bellamy found Octavia in the crush, and asked,
“How is he?”

Octavia pulled back enough of the swaddled wrapping to show off John’s squished, sleeping face. “Still sleeping,” she said in some amazement, hearing and feeling the breath in his lungs and the steady beat of his little heart close against the skin of her breast.

Andromeda pulled of her mask, and said kindly, and mostly to Octavia, “Newborns and infants usually go to sleep in loud and overwhelming situations. It’s their best defense against more stimulation than their systems can handle. They also sleep most of the first few days. So,” and she looked at Roan and raised her voice, “now is the time ride!”

Roan acknowledged her with a quick nod, then turned back to Nahum. “You should split off from us as soon as we hit the tree line. You’ll know best when it’s safe for you to return to the Citadel.”

Nahum nodded.

Roan looked at Bellamy and Lincoln. “Rifles out. Let’s not kill anyone if we don’t have too.”

Octavia wasn’t sure it wasn’t entirely her imagination, but she thought that he directed his last comment specifically to Duncan, who swallowed hard and nodded, looking like he was holding onto his sanity by his fingernails.

The four men who carried rifles slung them around and rapidly tore off and stuffed the wrappings in their shirts. At Roan’s direction, they pulled out along the road, facing back towards the riders at the gates of the Citadel, who were finally in formation and preparing to head out in pursuit. Roan fired a single shot into the air.

This gave them pause, but only for a moment. A mounted bowman nocked an arrow and fired, amazingly enough hitting none of them. He’d misjudged the distance on the gently rolling ground and his arrow arched high, and then fell short, burying itself into the ground ten feet in front of Roan’s horse. Roan narrowed his eyes, swung his rifle down to his shoulder and shot the bowman. It looked to Octavia like he’d hit him full in the center of the chest, knocking him backwards to fall slowly off his horse.

It did not look to Octavia like this was a lucky shot. Roan, it seemed, like most of the grounder warriors who’d joined the Ark Guard or Rangers, had taken to marksmanship like a fish to water. An old metaphor she’d finally seen in action awhile back. But this? This was not the first time Roan had ever fired a rifle at a target, either. She wondered when and where and how he’d learned to use one quite so well.

There was a quiet, shocked pause, then Roan called out, “Hos op! Masta op yo!” He raised his arm and dropped it sharply, pointing out the direction he wanted them to go and indicating that they should move out. Now.

Andromeda’s husband immediately spun his horse, kicked him to a canter and headed straight for the nearest treeline, disregarding the road that curved away to swing lazily around the Citadel. The rest of them turned their horses to follow, except for Bellamy, Lincoln and Duncan. Following Roan’s example, the three of them stayed to fire off several rounds into the ground in front of their pursuers. Octavia was pleased to see, as she risked a glance behind, that this had convinced those still pursuing them to turn around and dash back for the safety of the gate.

Their new path took them right across the corner of the large camping area that was spread out around the grounds of the horse fair. The gunshots had attracted the attention of those campers who were already rousing with the sun, and many of them were running towards the disturbance,
trying to make sense of what was going on.

Octavia was focused entirely on finding a path through them that wouldn’t hurt anyone, or smash any individual campsites, or run into any hobbled or staked-out horses, when she heard the weirdly terrifying sound of a galloping horse coming up fast behind her, driving beats tearing up the ground. A second later, Duncan raced by, his rifle raised as he charged for the unsuspecting spectators. Watching in horror, Octavia immediately realized that all his Reaper conditioning had kicked back in and he could only see targets, enemies, victims, that he was going to start killing innocents. People who had nothing to do with the struggle going on inside the leadership of the Ice Nation, who had no idea who Echo, or John Blake or Bellamy Blake were and probably wouldn’t care either way if they did.

“Duncan!” she screamed, knowing it was useless but trying to reach him anyway.

The riders in front of her, alerted by the galloping hoofbeats or by Octavia’s scream, were slowing and turning. Then another horse came pounding past her carrying Roan, bent low and long over his mount’s neck. As he drew up beside Duncan, whose horse was slowing because Duncan was now more focused on his rifle than on his speed, Roan rose, twisted, and launched himself off his saddle and into Duncan. Roan’s momentum carried them both completely over Duncan’s horse and onto the ground in a rolling, spinning mass of flailing arms and legs.

They came up grappling, Duncan roaring in nothing but wordless fury and swinging for Roan in a blind rage, Roan doing everything he could to evade or block the blows and to get his hands around Duncan for a bar hold. Then Clarke, and dear God where the fuck had Clarke come from, ran up behind Duncan with her hands raised and slammed them into either side of his neck. He stopped swinging for Roan, reached for his throat, and then his eyes rolled back in his head and he dropped like a stone.

Clarke met Roan’s eyes for a moment, both of them breathing hard, before she turned and cried, “Catch the horses!”

A confusing several minutes passed while their party collected themselves around Duncan’s quietly sleeping body. Clarke had hit him with a double dose of the tranquilizer darts so beloved by the Ark’s guards.

Clarke was laughing, on the ragged edge of hysteria, as she held up her gloved hands to explain, “I carry the tranq darts in pockets in my gloves. Duncan had them made for me. He said it was for when I was facing someone too big for me to take alone and he wouldn’t be there to help. Oh, God.”

And then she dropped forward, bending from the waist to rest her hands on her thighs, laughing and crying and panting all in one confused mess. Octavia started to dismount to go to Clarke, but Roan pointed to her and gestured sharply, as though he could push her back down, and barked out, “No. We’ve got to keep moving.”

Octavia settled back just as some helpful folks from the campground appeared with the runaway horses, who hadn’t gone very far without their riders. “We sling him over and tie him on,” Roan said, asking Clarke over his shoulder, “How long will he be out?”

Clarke had barely answered, “Twenty or thirty minutes, outside,” when Roan, who had leaned down to roll Duncan onto his shoulder, cried out a wordless sound and buckled to his knees, before dropping to his ass.

“Sweat Savior Heda,” he managed breathlessly, “I think I cracked a rib.” He tried to get up, but fell
back again, “Or two.”

Octavia realized that whatever adrenaline had been driving him until now, disguising his injuries, was spent.

Roan looked up at Bellamy. “You have to keep moving. Go. We’ll catch up if we can.”

To Andromeda he said, “Stick to the route, but go. Now.”

Then he looked at Clarke and said, still gasping around his words, “Go on. I’ll stay with Duncan.”

“No, I…” Clarke trailed off, obviously torn by her impulse to stay and help the injured men, and her desire to ride south with Bellamy and the rest. She looked up at Bellamy, her expression agonized and imploring all at once.

They exchanged a long, intense look, and then Bellamy nodded, letting her go. “I’ve got this,” he said. Then he looked at Lincoln and then to Octavia, who each nodded back at him. “We’ve got this. Catch up when you can.”

Octavia’s last glimpse of their fallen companions, before the horses and bystanders blocked her view, was of Clarke on the ground beside Roan, rooting through her medical bag. Turning forward again, Octavia set her jaw and kicked her horse to catch up with Bellamy and Lincoln.

*Keep moving. Don’t look back.*

That’s what Roan had said. That’s what they’d do. Get the hell out of the Ice Nation. Take John Blake *Kom Skaikru* home where he belonged. Home to Mt. Weather.
Bellamy kicked his horse forward, putting on a little burst of speed to catch up with the front of the line. Two hours of hard riding south from the Citadel and their party was down to eight riders now, including himself, Octavia and Lincoln and five members of Echo’s family acting as guides and guards and helping with the string of extra mounts carrying their packs.

“Andromeda,” he called. “I think we need to find a place to stop. Octavia says the baby won’t stop crying. She thinks, maybe, he’s hungry.”

Bellamy had been worrying privately about this since pretty much the moment he’d realized they’d have to run. No time to find a nursing mother to share or help. Without food, John would die just as surely as if Yeflin had forced his surrender to the wolves. All their efforts, all the people who’d been hurt or killed in the palace or in the streets of the Citadel, Roan’s and Duncan’s injuries, Clarke’s many twisty deals, all of it wasted. His voice had twisted, just a little, with his fear.

Andromeda met his eyes, then she nodded and raised her arm for a halt. John’s thin wails were clear in the stillness that followed. “In about a half mile, we’ll be at the farm of a friend. Can we all hold out that long? Octavia? Can you make it?” Andromeda asked.

“I can,” she said, “But...”

“John will be fine. Babies are tougher than you think. Otherwise humanity would have long since vanished from the face of the Earth.”

Octavia nodded and they pressed on.

The ‘farm’ turned out to be more like a little village. It was a collection of houses and workshops crowded around and facing a small paved square, with one large old house standing at the head of the open area. It recalled for Bellamy the old Spanish-colonial model of a hacienda, rather than the single family, New England-style farm he’d been expecting.

An older man came out to meet them, the flyaway white hair on his head a startling contrast to the rich, thick weight of his beard, its two long, grey braids reaching almost to the middle of his chest. The man watched them ride in to the paved plaza without expression, until he recognized Andromeda and her husband Ezram. Then a huge smile creased his lined face and he opened his arms wide to embrace them both, crying out in happy greeting as they thumped each others’ backs in relieved welcome.

It turned out this was Ezram’s great uncle, and he was the patriarch of this place.

While other residents of the settlement took their horses away, the old man quickly ushered Bellamy’s party into a large room with a kitchen on one side and a huge, scarred wooden table in the center, which was somehow much closer to Bellamy’s completely unarticulated expectations.

The three of them – Andromeda, her husband and his great uncle – spoke quickly together, gesturing rapidly and slipping into a strongly accented dialect of Trigedasleng scattered with English, and something else. The something else caught on Bellamy’s ears, buzzing with a distant familiarity. When it finally rang a bell, he frowned and interrupted, “Vy govorish' po-russki?”

They all turned and stared at him in varying degrees of shock.

He held open his hands, feeling faintly apologetic at their obvious distress. “One of the stations of
the Ark was Russian. It’s one of the nine required languages.”

The old man answered him, his words heavily shaded with his accent. “Vernyy. Da. Vashi ushi umny. There was a Russian-speaking community here in the Before Times. Not many outsiders speak it, so it keeps secrets.”

“The Cyrillic alphabet would help, too.” Bellamy couldn’t help himself, he smirked at the old man, briefly savoring his dismayed surprise.

The old man bowed his head and opened his hand, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. “Food,” he said. “And rest. And something for the infant? His mother has died?”

Bellamy sobered instantly, blinking away a clear image of Echo, flowers in her hair, ready for her funeral. Feeling the weight of the rings under his shirt, somehow cool on his heated skin, he swallowed hard and said, “Yes. She has.”

The old man nodded, indicated the table and went to speak to – his family? villagers? employees? – Bellamy never did get it figured out, not in the two hours they spent there.

But they did get food, their horses were watered and rested and brushed down, and a nursing mother bustled in. She took John to sit in a rocking chair by the big, and currently empty in the summer heat, fireplace. John’s cries halted almost immediately. But his faint – and faintly grating – high-pitched wail was quickly replaced by the most appalling choking, wheezing, slurping and gasping Bellamy had ever heard from an infant. When Bellamy rushed up in alarm, the woman smiled reassuringly. “Not to worry, young man,” she said, her English strong and clear. “My girl is almost a year old now, so I have lots of milk, coming fast, and this little mite has hardly learned to swallow yet. I think a cup will be better, and that way you can hold him yourself.”

So that’s where Bellamy learned to feed a newborn from a small metal cup, still warm from fresh mother’s milk. John’s little head bobbed eagerly as he held his tiny, pink mouth open for more, looking like nothing so much as a hungry baby bird while trying mightily to focus his eyes on the object in Bellamy’s hands, and periodically belching with a satisfying ferocity. By the time Bellamy handed his son off to be cleaned up – between spills and spit-up and a very wet diaper he was a mess – Bellamy felt like he was coming apart at the seams.

His son – and wasn’t that a phrase for the ages – his son. His son was a wondrous tiny miracle and just looking at him made Bellamy’s heart swell so large with happiness he thought it might burst out of his chest. Holding him made him weepy with joy. He couldn’t stop running his fingers across John’s head, through his silky baby hair, and down his arms to his miniature little fingers, assuring himself that he was real, that this wasn’t a dream. But in the very same moment he felt raw and bleeding with hurt and anger. Echo deserved to be here. She deserved to be with her son. John deserved his mother.

And Bellamy…Bellamy hovered right at the edge of the thought that he had deserved his wife, but he sensed that the chasm that would open under his feet if he went there would have no end. He fled back to his son and his anger.

John didn’t have his mother because a now-dead bastard rolled for a coup with Echo’s life, and Bellamy had to go outside before he started smashing up their host’s lovely kitchen in what would be a vain attempt to purge all that he was feeling.

He paced the edges of the flower-lined portico instead, fighting for some stable platform to grab onto in the raging maelstrom of his emotions. But even the memory of Yeflin’s head landing on the ground offered only a tiny handful. He’d wanted so, so badly to kill him himself, even as he
respected that it took a lifetime of fighting and training side by side to do what Roan and Duncan had made look so smooth and easy.

Everyone else, wisely, left him alone it until it was time to leave.

The nursing mother pressed a leather bota into Bellamy’s hands as they were preparing to mount up. “Here,” she said. “This won’t last you more than another day, but it will give you that long to find more.”

“Your child?” Bellamy asked, startled by how full it was. “Will she have enough?”

The woman laughed, patted his arm, and assured him it would all be fine. Then Andromeda and Ezram stepped up to offer their farewells. They were heading back to the Citadel, worried about their children, worried about the rest of their kin.

“Thank you for bringing Echo home safely,” Andromeda said to Bellamy, as she held him close. “It was an honor to have you in our family, even for such a brief time.”

Bellamy thanked her sincerely. In his head he understood what being a member of such a family might have meant for himself and for his son. He knew very well how much they had meant to Echo. But in his heart, he was glad to be running for home and the Ark. For his own people.

Ezram pulled Bellamy into a quick one-armed hug and shoulder thump, “Bring him home one day, if you can. Introduce him to his cousins.”

They were down now to the two hostlers helping with the packhorses, both of them taking time to teach Bellamy – and to his surprise Lincoln as well – how to manage a string of horses while riding your own.

“Not so many horses in the Tree Clan,” grunted Lincoln, stressing “Tree” and scowling in mild irritation at Bellamy.

They stopped again several hours later, this time at the edge of a small, spring-fed lake. The stack of chopped wood, the stone fire ring, the small patches of worn dirt marking a minimally-maintained camping spot for the few regular travelers on this route. The older of the two horsemen told them, as they were leaving to return to the Citadel, “Follow this trail east another two hours, and you’ll meet up with the old south road.”

They thanked the men, rested briefly and fed John, and then kept going, leading the string of packhorses themselves. Roan’s instructions and their instincts were driving them at a steady clip, anxious to put as many miles as they could between themselves and any pursuit.

Apparently feeling far freer to talk now that it was back to just the three of them, Octavia rode up beside Bellamy, a very determined expression on her face, her arm wrapped protectively – and somehow meaningfully – around his snoring son. Bellamy wished he were foolhardy enough to run away. If ever Lexa approached Roan with that expression on her face, he felt sure that Roan would run away, a sassy quip trailing off his lips as he vanished over the far horizon. “Yes?” Bellamy inquired instead.

“It was good of you to let Clarke stay behind,” she began.

Bellamy barked out a sharp, short, incredulous laugh. “Let? You do know Clarke, right? She was going to stay either way. I could be understanding and helpful, and accept the obvious with some class, or be a dick and make her feel guilty for something she needed to do.”
“She’d have come with us if you asked!”

Bellamy had no idea who Octavia was defending. She probably didn’t know either. An instinctive leap-to-defend was her thing, whether or not it made any sense.

“Which would also be a dick move,” he told her. “Roan needed medical assistance fast, before he ended up hanging by his thumbs for bringing chaos to the Citadel. On top of that, he’s got his hands full with Duncan right now. They needed her help. We don’t. We’re good. We can do this.”

Octavia nodded, but didn’t look happy about it. Which was fine with him. Bellamy wasn’t happy about it either, but Earth was full of not being happy. He should be used to it by now. They all should.

Which reminded him. Looking over to Lincoln he asked, “Are you okay? I wanted to ask before, but with other people around…”

Lincoln nodded, and if his smile was small and forced, it was a real smile. “Yeah. I’m good,” he said. “Thanks for asking, though. Duncan,” he paused and sighed, shaking his head, “Duncan was on the Red nearly twice as long as anyone else who survived. My experience was nothing to his. His demons are much bigger and scarier than mine, much harder to control.”

“Will that always happen to him?” Bellamy asked. “When he’s in a battle?”

“I don’t know,” was Lincoln’s only answer. But he looked worried. And sad. And Bellamy didn’t ask any more questions.

The south road was familiar enough from their previous trips to the Azgeda Citadel that with the long daylight hours available to them they were able to travel probably another five miles further along before they decided to stop for the night. Then they looked for a quiet place to camp along the bank a small river, out of sight of any other travelers, however rare they might be.

They were sorting out their gear, discovering what had been packed and what had been lost and debating the order of the night watches, when Lincoln first heard voices. He signaled for silence, and then the three of them realized, to a general sagging and grinning in happy relief, that it was Duncan and Clarke. They were calling out to let them know who was crashing through the underbrush.

Bellamy returned the hails, and a few minutes later their missing comrades rode into their camp, all three looking the worse for wear. At some point they’d all scrubbed off their paint, but done only a cursory job. Their faces looked sooty and smeared, adding to their general air of exhaustion. Clarke had pulled out all her white extensions, and was back to her new ‘normal’ of brown hair. Roan, his left arm immobilized and in a sling and holding himself extremely awkwardly in his saddle, looked particularly drained Bellamy thought.

Clarke tumbled off her horse and took a step towards him, but then she hesitated. “Bellamy?” she asked, and it seemed to him that her husky voice crackled with emotion and exhaustion.

Her eyes were so full of worry and guilt and fear, combined with her smile of relief that they were back together, that he did the only thing he could. He opened his arms and pulled her in, flooded by his own sense of relief that she was safe. It was only now that he realized how afraid for her he’d been. Whatever the three of them might have faced, if they’d been caught and dragged before Nia, was too unbearable to even think about.

Her hug was quick and strong and then she was leaning back with her hands on his shoulders,
searching his face. “How are you? How’s the baby?”

“Good. Okay. I’m okay.” He was terrible, actually, swinging wildly between rage and grief and joy, but this was really not the time and place to get in to it. “Baby’s good.”

“How did you catch us so soon?” Octavia was asking, rising to her feet with John in her arms while Lincoln reached for the abandoned reins of Clarke’s horse.

“We weren’t that far behind you, we knew where you were going, and you left a trail a blind mutant could follow,” Roan replied, in a particularly acerbic tone, and with an expression that no longer disguised his opinion that they were all babbling idiots. Then he scowled, and his voice turned sharply critical when he complained, “But I wish you’d gone further before you stopped. I wanted to travel at least sixty-five miles today, not barely more than fifty.”

“Don’t mind him,” Clarke said, rolling her neck in Roan’s direction. “He’s in a very bad mood. Embracing a millennia of macho conditioning by refusing any pain medication has turned him into the world’s biggest bitch.”

“I told you I’d take it when we stopped for the night,” he glowered at her. “It’s just a few cracked ribs.”

“If by a few you mean three, and by cracked you mean one is broken, sure. Oh, and don’t forget your separated shoulder.”

“I’m not likely to forget that I can’t move my arm, now that you’ve tied it down!” Roan managed to lace his complaint with both an accusation that Clarke had done something intentionally and unnecessarily burdensome and his impression that he was suffering unfairly as a result.

There was just that something in their exchange, and in Clarke’s long suffering-sigh, that left Bellamy with the strongest impression that the complaints and the squabbling had been going on for hours. He stopped wishing they’d caught up with him and Octavia and Lincoln sooner.

Duncan had swung off his horse and handed him off to Lincoln. Now he came over to Roan and said, “Spin around frontward this time, granny-style.”

Roan grimaced, but did as Duncan asked, shifting awkwardly around until he was sitting sideways in his saddle and facing his partner. Then, bracing his good right arm on Duncan’s shoulder, he slid off his horse while Duncan half-lifted, half-guided him down with his hands at his waist, steadying him when he rocked a bit on the landing. Gasping from the effort, but ever irrepressible, Roan looped his arm the rest of the way around Duncan’s shoulders and said, “My hero!”

Duncan snorted softly. “I’ve seen prettier damsels in distress.”

“Not true,” Roan smirked at him. “I’ve always been the prettiest.”

“Drag Juliet’s ass over here, Romeo,” Clarke called. She’d taken a seat by the small fire Lincoln had barely finished getting started and now she was pointing to a bedroll she’d retrieved from her horse, a small yellow ampule in her hands. “It’s morphine time.”

By the light of the fire, they took turns holding the baby, ate a trail meal of dried meats and fruits washed down with canteens refilled at the riverbank, and caught each other up on all that had happened since they’d been separated. Bellamy was just hefting the still half-full bota, when Clarke dramatically slapped her forehead and jumped to her feet, heading for her large pack, dumped on the ground beside her saddle. “Oh my God. It was all so crazy I never did tell you. I have powdered infant formula. Jackson found a recipe for it, using soybeans, and made some up.
Just boil the water first! We should have plenty to get John back to Mt. Weather.”

At first swept by an enormous wave of relief, Bellamy felt an unhappy certainty blooming quickly behind it in his gut. “Clarke?” he asked. “Why did your mom send it? Did she know that we never had a chance?”

“No. She thought you had a chance.” To Bellamy’s surprise it was Roan who answered. Bellamy had thought he was already asleep, lying flat on the bedroll spread by the other side of the fire. He’d been floating in a morphine haze, rousing only enough to eat and drink when Duncan forced it on him. “But Dr. Griffin knew how hard it was going to be, away from modern technology if anything went wrong. She wanted Clarke to be prepared. She said that even if Echo did survive, nursing might be too hard, or she might not have enough milk.”

“Anything and everything can go wrong, Bellamy. Even when you don’t have any reason to worry. You heard all those stories just this morning. And Echo’s odds were worse than many. Not impossible, but…” Clarke paused, her voice and her expression full of sorrow and regret. “It was better to be prepared.”

Bellamy nodded, and told himself he had to let it go. No one could have worked more valiantly to save Echo than Clarke and Octavia had. And now, thanks to Jackson’s and Abby Griffin’s foresight, they would be able to get John home. He looked down at the infant sleeping on his chest, overwhelmed again by his fierce need to protect his son. Bellamy pressed his lips to his son’s head and swore to himself that he would do whatever it took to keep him safe.
Clarke grinned and picked up her pace when she recognized the pair of horses tied to the hitching post outside the Plateau Clinic. She flung open the screen door, letting it bang shut behind her as she cried, “Duncan!” and tackled him with a surprise hug.

“Clarke,” he said, quiet laughter in his voice as he set her back on the ground. “Worried about us?”

“No!” she declared, looking back and forth between him and Roan, who was sitting on the examining table as her mom manipulated his arm and shoulder, asking him if anything hurt. Then she shrugged self-consciously and made a face. “Maybe. A little. Between Indra and Lexa, I wasn’t completely sure if you’d make it out of TonDC alive.”

“Still alive, and reporting for my eight-week checkup as promised,” Roan said with a grin.

“How is he?” Clarke asked, turning to her mother. “Everything healed properly?”

Abby nodded and stepped back. “Yep. Ribs knitted up just fine, and both shoulder ligaments are completely healed, too.” She waved to the screens behind her showing the results of a scan she must have already run. “Full range of motion has returned.” She looked at Clarke and smiled with warm approval. “You did well to immobilize his entire arm and shoulder. It healed smoothly, with no clavicle bump. He’s completely cleared to return to duty.” She lifted the corner of her mouth in a wry smile as she looked back at Roan, “Whatever it is your duties actually are.”

Roan slid off the table and reached for his machete, slipping its strap easily over his head and settling it into its customary place on his back. “Saving the world, of course,” he drawled, winking at her mother and offering her a saucy grin.

Clarke rolled her eyes, but knew she couldn’t really tease him about his ego. Kane had reserved the entire morning tomorrow for his staff to meet with Roan and Duncan to go over the various strategies for best neutralizing ALIE. Roan and Duncan would most likely form an essential part of – and whom was she kidding here? Roan would end up taking charge no matter what the formal structure of the group was supposed to be. Instead she asked, “So really, how did it go? In TonDC and Polis?”

“Does Indra still hate me and challenge every recommendation I make, even by proxy?” Roan made a face. “Yes. Pretty much. But she’s adjusting.”

“And Lexa? How’s she?”

“Good. She’s holding things in Polis together, for now. The leader of her conservative wing is angry that his nephew ran away to the mountain, but he’s not going to demand him back.” Roan twisted his lips into a sardonic smirk. “Last man who tried that lost his head.”

Clarke snorted at the not very funny line, and asked, “Does anyone know you helped the kids?”

“Lexa doesn’t even seem to know, though she might guess at this point. It seems that no one thought the kids were even that friendly, so while they assume that Rhodey and Freya followed Budeka’s example – for which they do blame me – it hasn’t yet occurred to anyone that she invited them along.”
“She’s doing very well. All three of them are,” Abby interjected then. “Budeka’s teachers all love having her in class. You should be very proud of her.”

Clarke knew this wasn’t mere politeness. It was quite true. Budeka combined her mother’s reserve with her father’s charm and quick intelligence. She was racing through those fields in which her Trikru education was limited, and flying in those where she was already proficient. Her teachers were thrilled by her. And if their attitudes were improved by their suspicion that they were helping to shape the next generation of Trikru leadership, Clarke had done nothing to dissuade them.

And Raven, Wick and Sinclair were more than happy to have another pair of crazy-smart, excited kids in their workshops. This experiment in cross-cultural exchange at least was going well.

Roan looked more or less like he was about to burst with pride. “I am. I only wish Anya could see her now.”

“Papa!” The screen door banged open again, as the girl in question flew through and leapt for her father, wrapping her long, slim arms around his shoulders and burying her face in his neck for a lengthy hug. Roan easily lifted her up to her toes, rocking slightly as he held her as tightly as she did him, and, it seemed to Clarke, letting go only reluctantly when she finally wiggled back out of his grasp. “Come on!” she seized his arm, “I want you to meet someone,” and she dragged him out the door.

Clarke exchanged a laughing glance with her mother, then looked at Duncan and mouthed dramatically, “A BOY.”

“We better keep up then,” Duncan said, holding open the door and gesturing for Clarke and Abby to precede him. “I think he’s ready for this, but I’d hate to be wrong.”

By the time Clarke, her mother and Duncan caught up with Budeka and Roan, the pair of them were seated at a table already filled with other young teens. Clarke pointed out three empty seats a few tables away and steered her mother toward those instead. Duncan followed, waving to Budeka to let her know where they were.

Clarke watched and listened from a distance as Roan charmed Budeka’s friends. Even The Boy. She saw how much it made Budeka glow with pride as she held onto Roan’s arm and leaned into his side, and finally put it all together. “She’s never had the chance to show him off, has she?” she said to Duncan.

“No,” he said. “He hasn’t visited her outside the walls of Lexa’s home since she was a small child and still lived with Anya and her mother.”

Roan soon excused himself, leaving his daughter to her friends, and came over to join Clarke and the other adults. A thought that reduced Clarke to shocked silence once she had it. When had she become one of the ‘adults’? Sitting at the adult table? Talking about adult things like politics and war instead of flirtations and teachers and homework? While she was recovering from her shock at the realization that – like it or not – she truly was an adult now, she caught bits and pieces of the conversation at the table directly behind her, and started to listen more closely.

Three traders, a woman and two men, occupied the table. They hailed from various clans, it seemed, as they were speaking mostly in English as they shared news and gossip. One of them was down from the north, from Azgeda territory, and he was telling the others the events of Yeflin’s almost-successful attempted overthrow of Queen Nia. How it was foiled at the last by her loyal household troops and the sudden appearance of the Skaikru Wanheda, who had arrived just in time to rally the Queen’s supporters. And that, in the bloody street fighting that followed, the Wanheda
and her Champion had killed Yeflin and cut off his head, killing the rebellion at the same time.

“I’m sorry,” Clarke said, leaning over and feigning a friendly expression of polite interest, “I couldn’t help but overhear a bit of your story. Would you mind sharing it again? We haven’t had much news of the Azgeda since Yeflin left here last spring. He’s dead, you say?”

“Oh, yes. And his forces scattered,” the man responded. He was willing to swing around in his chair, and soon they were all listening avidly as he repeated what he had heard from another trader who claimed to have been in the Citadel at the time. When he got to the part about how the Wanheda and her Champion had cut off Yeflin’s head, Roan actually cleared his throat and asked, as if he was just making conversation but wasn’t quite sure he had heard correctly, “The Wanheda killed Yeflin?”

“Yes. Drove her sword straight through his chest, and then her Champion sliced off his head. That’s how I heard it, anyway,” he said, growing a bit defensive in the face of Roan’s darkening frown. “And then,” the traveler thrust out his chin a bit aggressively, “they set his body on fire. I heard.”

Roan’s glance flickered over to Duncan, a question in his eyes. Duncan waved his fingers, indicating it was all the same to him.

Roan’s expression cleared. “I’m sure that’s how it went,” he said, turning back to the trader with a bright smile. “If that’s how you heard the tale. From someone who was there.”

The man nodded, mollified.

“Do you happen to know why the Wanheda and her Champion were in the Citadel, battling Nia’s enemies in the streets?” Roan asked, all earnest curiosity now.

“Something about a baby, is what I heard,” the man said, but he made a very skeptical face as he shared this, waving it away to make sure they didn’t accuse him of actually believing this part. “That they were there to steal his half-Azgeda son from his wife’s family. But how can the Wanheda’s lover have a wife? That doesn’t make any sense, so I think that part is made up.”

“No doubt. It would be hard to have a wife and a lover at the same time,” Roan nodded very seriously.

The man narrowed his eyes, suspicious that he was being mocked. “Not him. But I’m thinking that the Wanheda wouldn’t share like that.”

“Ah. Right.” Roan couldn’t help himself. He looked at Clarke and winked. “I’m sure she doesn’t share.”

Clarke sent him her best ‘please do shut up now’ glare, which he ignored of course.

“Do you know why the Wanheda and her Champion support Nia?” he asked their informant.

“Easy. Nia will stay true to the Skaikru ceasefire for this year. Yeflin was going to toss out the agreement and march to war. The Wanheda defends her people.”

Roan nodded seriously, “That makes a lot of sense. Thanks. Appreciate all the news. Have another round, on me. Just point me out to the server, I’ll take care of it later.”

By which he meant Clarke or Kane would take care of it later, but Clarke realized she should have offered the same herself. Even now she could forget that the underlying principle of Clan
encounters was exchange. It’s part of why the Trikru had been so baffled by – and baffling to – them a year ago. She and Bellamy hadn’t known to offer anything, thinking peace was an end to be shared, and the first Trikru they met didn’t think the Arkers had much of value to offer that couldn’t just be taken from them by force. It had been a very steep learning curve for everyone involved.

Before she could ask Roan and Duncan any more detailed questions about Lexa’s situation in Polis, Octavia dashed up to hug both men. Bellamy, wearing John in a baby sling and walking more slowly with Lincoln, trailed after her. When they reached Roan and Duncan, the four men settled for manly arm grips and shoulder thumps. They had all just resettled themselves at their tables, pulling over a few more and pushing them all together, when Raven and Wick showed up. Clarke realized that the afternoon was wearing on quickly, the shadows beginning to stretch out again across the plateau, and that it was the end of the day shift. The canteen was filling up as people stopped by on the glorious late summer afternoon for food and beer and whatever excitement the plateau might offer this evening.

Bellamy and Octavia had joined the nursery cooperative, which had allowed them both to return to their regular duties on a four-days-a-week schedule. Lincoln and Octavia moved into Echo’s old suite, along with Bellamy and the baby, and for now formed a pretty tight unit of Blakes. Clarke actually saw a lot of Bellamy these days. She ate about half her meals at the big table the Blakes usually shared with the other Rangers in the mess hall, and she and Bellamy were both members of Kane’s advisory council, which was quite busy at the moment.

Kane had assigned them to the team tasked with creating a variety of possible strategies for eliminating the threat posed by ALIE. At this point, Clarke and Bellamy were some of the best ‘experts’ Kane had for advising him about how to engage the clans in this effort. As part of that project, she and Bellamy had even managed to engage in a few very satisfying arguments about the precise structure of the trade systems that held the clans’ loose alliances together, and whether or not they were entirely barter based, or if they were actually using an underlying monetary system. That somewhere in the middle they’d managed to flip sides and were now arguing passionately for their opponent’s previous position only entertained them both once Octavia pointed it out.

A few more off-duty Rangers arrived, and Clarke’s mom excused herself from their group, offering them her spot and dropping a light touch on Clarke’s shoulder and a quick smile just for her as she left. Probably off to track down Marcus, Clarke guessed. Meanwhile Roan played with John in his lap while the baby beamed up at him. Roan also appeared to be listening with genuine interest to Octavia’s exhausting list of all of John’s many exciting baby milestones of the last several weeks. Clarke watched him thoughtfully for a few seconds, and decided his attention was about half-real…and half-faked.

Because a man with a baby drew women and girls like moths to a flame, Budeka and several of her new girlfriends eventually swooped down on Roan, and then, with Bellamy’s permission, carried John off like a trophy to show around to the rest of the kids roaming around the plateau.

Clarke found this amusing. It reminded her of how Bellamy had handled the attention when they’d first returned from the Azgeda Citadel. Whenever he’d appeared in public with John, he’d been nearly mobbed by a swarm of women, aged fifteen to fifty, all eager to catch his eye. In self-defense he’d adopted the practice of treating a request to hold the baby as an offer to babysit, and would immediately vanish, blinding his target with a soul-bending smile and an ‘I’ll just be right back, have something to check on.’ Leaving the poor woman stranded with an infant in her arms while under the watchful glare of Aunt Octavia. Within a very short time he was largely left alone, at least when he had John with him.
The traders at the next table finally rose, and their particular teller-of-tales stopped by Roan to thank him again for the round of drinks. Which had turned into two rounds of whiskey and a meal. Clarke had been watching. Her mom the Chancellor had nodded to the woman who ran the Canteen when she’d looked over at them, her eyebrows raised in question. Roan must have seen it, too, because he stood and clapped the man on the shoulder and invited him to share the news from the north with more of their friends, and he nodded at Bellamy in particular.

Grateful to oblige, not that Roan was giving him any options, the man dragged his chair over and started again at the beginning.

Bellamy interrupted at the same spot that Roan had, with nearly the same astonished expression on his face, and using almost the same words. “The Wanheda and her Champion killed Yeflin?”

“Chopped his head clean off!” their informant nodded, swinging his fists together as though he were wielding a sword, miming the motion and adding a whooshing sound effect. “Blood flew off the blade and arced into the sky he hit him with such force. Yeflin’s head tumbled clear across the pavement and rolled into the gutter. I heard.”

The volatile marriage of beer and whiskey had added significantly to the gory details of the story, Clarke noted.

“That’s not…” Bellamy started to object, but Roan neatly cut him off with, “all of the story, you’re right.” Roan gestured to the man to keep going. “Tell us what happened next. Where did the Wanheda and her Champion and his son go?”

“Vanished in a puff of blue smoke. I heard.”

“Now you’re full of shit and whiskey. Try again.”

“High tailed it out of town, fast enough to make the gates spin. Helped keep Nia on the throne, they did. Killed her biggest enemy for her. But they wanted no part of the mop up. Never do the dirty work, heroes. Never help with the mess, dig the graves, pick up the body bits. That’s for grunts like us. And,” he paused to glare at Roan, “I said I don’t believe that branwada chichnes about some baby. Who fights for a mutant baby?”

Bellamy glared across the table. “His parents. Parents fight for their children.”

Roan gestured understandingly at Bellamy, but turned back to their informant. “You really think this Wanheda is real, then? Not merely some ally of Nia’s helping her out?”

“Ai nou sté spicha!” the man said, sitting back and beginning to look angry.

Duncan intervened smoothly, “Of course not,” he said, with an ostentatiously quelling glare in Roan’s direction before he looked back at the trader. “No one here is calling you a liar.”

“She’s real,” the Trader insisted. “My friend. He saw her. Long white hair trailing down her back, taller than a man, stronger than any warrior. Eyes that burn you where you stand,” he shivered, then looked back at Roan. “Not really burn. Like…” he trailed off, his English failing him.

“A metaphor. I understand,” Roan said.

“No,” he shook his head, then lowered his voice and whispered, “A mutant. A space-born mutant. Just like her Champion. And his half-mutant son.”

Roan nodded at the trader, thanked him and sent him on his way. Then he looked over at Bellamy
“Welcome to the world of the living legends.”

Bellamy was shaking his head and seemed quite upset by it all. “I didn’t kill Yeflin. You did. You and Duncan!”

“That’s not how I heard it,” Roan said, and his expression was completely serious.

Bellamy scowled at him and then appealed to Duncan, “Doesn’t that bother you? Not to have credit for your kill?”

“No,” Duncan replied. “I stopped counting the people that I killed a long time ago. It’s not a number that I take any pride in.”

Bellamy’s mouth set into a frustrated grimace. “This is wrong!” he declared, addressing the whole of their group, “There are plenty of people out there who’ll be able to separate some fact from fiction. Enough to believe that I did that, that I cut off Yeflin’s head.” He looked at Clarke. “That Clarke killed him. Who will hold her responsible. Again.”

“Keep denying it. No one will believe you, but they’ll be impressed with your modesty,” Roan said, sounding sympathetic but looking pleased with himself at the same time.

“But you really don’t want any credit…?” Bellamy trailed off at Roan vigorously shaking his head.

“No,” he said, quite firmly. “My reputation for bringing trouble doesn’t need any extra shine. This is a good story, builds your reputations, and leaves me and Duncan out of it.”

Bellamy retreated to grumpy silence and Raven filled the lull, saying, her expression full of amused disbelief, “That guy had no idea that his Wanheda was sitting right here the whole time, did he?”

Wick laughed. “None at all. He’s looking for a magical creature that appears and disappears in puffs of blue smoke. Not a human being like himself.”

“I wonder if we could make a blue-smoke machine…” Raven looked at Wick with mischief in her eye. Wick immediately started sketching out ideas, their Wanheda-enhancing Rube Goldberg-device gaining more extraordinary capabilities by the second, much to the general hilarity of their tablemates.

Budeka reappeared about then, ready to hand off a baby who needed a fresh diaper to his permanent caretakers, and to carry her father and Duncan off to supper with her and her friends. The last thing Clarke heard from Roan was, “Barn first! Still haven’t put the horses away!”

The group began to break up, peeling off for various errands or the evening meal, until it was just Clarke and Bellamy remaining at one of the small tables. Octavia and Lincoln had already headed inside with the tired baby.

“So,” she said, meeting his eyes.

“Yeah,” he replied.

“That’s a thing.”

“Yeah.”

“Like a costume. A character in a play.”

“Or a superhero,” Bellamy half-smiled at her, offering her a different way to think about it.
Clarke shook her head, rejecting the offer. “A superhero who kills people. A mass-murdering superhero.”

He reached across the table and covered her hand with his own. “A superhero who saves as many as she can, against incredible odds. Who never, ever gives up the fight. Even when it’s unwinnable.”

Clarke felt Echo behind his words, blinked against the wetness in her eyes, and threaded her fingers through his. “With a Champion. Who swings a mighty blade.”

Bellamy shot her a startled look, and then he began to snicker. “A mighty blade?”

Which made Clarke snicker too, once she realized what she’d said. And then he laughed, and she laughed, and their laughter filled the air around them, and she realized that the sun was still bright, and the trees were still green, and they were still alive after a year on the ground.

“Come on, Superhero,” Bellamy said as he stood up and pulled her to her feet. “Let’s go get some supper.”

“Fine. Champion.” She bumped his arm.

“Sidekick, I’m pretty sure,” he said, and slung his arm around her shoulders.

They were still laughing as they made their way into the mountain.

~~~~The End~~~~

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who read along. I have really enjoyed writing and sharing this entirely unexpected (by me!) story.

End Notes

About the "Series" tag.

When I started this story, I thought I was writing a series of loosely connected ficlets about what it might be like if the Arkers took over Mt. Weather. This was something I thought was so obviously in their best interest, but it was also an idea that seemed to be shut down by the show runners early on (in an irritating bit of mis-direction in retrospect!), and it certainly was not a popular notion in the first rush of post S2 fic, which tended to focus on a hard winter spent hungry and cold at Camp Jaha. As a result, I thought I was playing with a series of short - and entirely fantastical - little portraits of things the Arkers might discover (how Dante Wallace knew so much about the internal goings on of the Trikru, for instance) once they moved into the mountain, and how they might begin to re-build their society now that they were returned to the ground. But then, I read more spoilers for S3, got more ideas, and somehow my ficlets all began to coalesce into a single story. With the help and
encouragement of the brilliant Jeanie205, I accepted the truth of that and pulled all the ficlets together into what was then Part 17 of the old series, and carried on from there. I decided to leave the original sixteen ficlets as they were, so as not to lose the lovely notes that readers left for me on those posts.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!