“And they don’t have superpowers. They are semi-successful experiments. Your people will not take any action against Sky Crew without my order: their code names are bad enough. I will not have Polis turn into some Gotham-esque battleground. Dismissed.”

“Uh, actually, Metropolis had more superpowers—”

“Dismissed.”

Notes
See the end of the work for notes.
Clarke has never been a fan of the night time.

The streetlights in Polis make the sky a dirty orange color: it’s yellow on black on stress and the feeling of another day, slipping through her fingertips. Another deadline, another—

“Third and Harrison, armed robbery. Skylark, do you copy?”

Another asshole, acting like the lack of sun means a lack of identity, trying to get up to some bullshit.

“This is Skylark,” Clarke says. “On it. Thanks, Wire.”

She pushes herself to her feet with one hand, a move that would look very smooth and cool were anyone on this roof with her to see it. It’s eleven stories to the ground, but that’s not where she’s going: instead she turns to the building to her right and steps back a few paces to get a running start.

Her feet don’t make a sound on the cement. Raven had taken care of that when she designed her boots. If she tries hard enough, she can pretend she’s flying.

Then she pushes off, and even though she’s made jumps like these a thousand times her stomach still swoops. Sometimes she thinks that the day it stops will be the day she hangs up her mask. Most of the time, she remembers why she’s needed.

She’ll retire when she’s dead.

So she jumps to the next building. And the next.

She relaxes her muscles just enough that she’s lighter: pushing off the rooftops, going farther in one bound than she could at normal mass. Some people think that it takes effort for her to release her body’s gravity, but the real challenge is staying on the ground.

“It’s the house,” Raven says, and Clarke checks over the edge of the high-rise to see the next building is indeed nine stories below her, capped with a slanted shingle roof.

“I love zoning laws.” And then she lets herself go weightless, holding onto the building only by her fingertips.

She digs her nails in between the cracks in the brick and pulls herself, head-first, towards earth.

But when she bursts heroically through the already-broken front door, gun raised, the thieves have fled. For all their speed, they were thorough: there isn’t a piece of furniture in here that hasn’t been overturned, a drawer left unopened. In the wreckage, one man kneels over another, holding out a cloth. A crooked portrait of a woman smiles down at them both.

“They went towards downtown,” the younger, uninjured man says, pointing.
Clarke turns to go after them, but at the older’s hiss of pain, she hesitates. “You call an
ambulance?”

“He’s fine, just get them!”

So Clarke runs.

“Wire, did you get that?”

“On it.” She can hear the reassuring click of typing Raven through her Bluetooth. “The building
you just climbed down has a security camera. Three guys, wearing— hazmat suits? They kept
going they’re at… yep, traffic camera, shit, they’re in a car. Homer, where are you?”

“On top of the Starbucks on fourth,” Bellamy says. “I’ll cut them off.”

Clarke tries to catch some of her breath. “Meet you there.”

It started with a boy. Boy friend. Boyfriend. Ex-boyfriend. Now a dead ex-boyfriend, but at the
beginning he had just been a boy, who had a faith in people only slightly more ridiculous than his
hair. Finn had been the one to get them walking the streets, keeping watch over the neighborhood,
because—

No, it started with a girl. Twelve years old, killed when she was caught in the middle of a fight she
had no place in. And that death had been on them, on all of them, because Charlotte was one of
theirs, from—

No.

It had started with one hundred kids in a juvenile detention facility north of the city, and a woman
who thought she had figured out how to make super-humans. Her partner was a warden with test
subjects nobody cared about, and nothing to lose: if it worked, they were young, easy to mold into
a private army and if it didn’t, well, viruses went around prisons from time to time.

The last time Clark had seen Lorelei Tsing and Cage Wallace, they had both been on fire.

Then had come the outside parties overly invested in their health, who were relieved when tests
showed that the remains of the hundred had average strength, average lung capacity, average
intelligence— because it would have been a waste, such a waste, if the only super-humans ever
created were a group of delinquent kids. So those that had survived (that hadn’t died covered in
blisters like Atom, or within grasping distance of freedom like Fox, or whose lungs collapsed like
Myles, or were killed in an escape attempt like Roma, or whose body tore itself to pieces like
Jones, or, or, or,) were given a housing allowance in damages, and had all their sentences ended.
Then they were shipped off to the Arkadia neighborhood, in rooms stacked on top of each other in
a building barely more than a tenement. Just malnourished kids welcoming their freedom.

It is, after all, so easy to feign exhaustion when life has already been exhausting enough. It’s easy
enough to tremble from weakness you don’t feel, to huff and puff on the strength test and take your
time making the triangle out of various shapes. For Clarke to make her weight exactly what it
should be according to her BMI charts, for Octavia to come out of hiding and Finn to keep his feet
on the ground. They were just exhausted, abused, sick, and nowhere near super.
It’s easy to pretend to be less than normal when that’s all you’ve ever been.

But here is the truth, tucked away between the thin walls and leaking pipes. Between the blend of sympathy and disdain and crumbling promises. And the truth is this:

A very fit human, giving their all in a fight, will tire after less than three minutes.

The fastest human foot speed on record is twenty-seven miles per hour, a speed maintained for ten seconds.

And the truth is also this:

Clarke has been running thirty miles per hour for the past twenty-two.

“Grey civic,” Raven says, but she doesn’t need to: there’s only one car that’s left abandoned in the intersection, doors hanging empty and both tires shot out.

Next to it, a man in a mask is engaging in hand-to-hand combat with three figures who do indeed appear to be wearing hazmat suits.

Clarke catches one around the neck and drags him away, flinging him to the ground and giving his kneecap a solid stomp with a foot that weighs three hundred pounds more than it did a moment ago. He screams, and she shoots him with a tranq. And then there’s something moving behind her, and she ducks, spins on one heel, swings her gun out, and pistol-whips the guy in the back of the knee. Head-butts him in the face as he goes down. Click goes the tranq gun again.

Bellamy finishes off the third one, just in time for a car to start honking at them.

“We’re working on it!” Clarke shouts, although she doubts the angry driver can hear her. “Rav—Wire, we’ve caused a traffic jam.”

“That one I can’t fix for you,” she says. A faint snicker can be detected.

Huffing, Clarke turns back towards the car. She starts to tell Bellamy to look for whatever it is they stole, but then she sees the carved wooden box on the floor of the passenger seat next to two boxes of gum and a sock.

If it’s not what went missing, well, Bellamy had a good amount of contact with the thieves: he’ll be able to track them down.

The other car honks again. This time it has friends.

“I’ll just start directing traffic with my emergency light, shall I?” Bellamy mutters.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea.” Clarke settles herself in the driver’s seat for a moment, examining the lid. It’s got an infinity sign carved in it, surrounded with what is either gold leaf or a good fake.

She shouldn’t open it.

Just because she went to recover someone’s stolen property doesn’t mean she has a right to know what it is, and they don’t have much time— they’re going to have to clear out this mess in a minute, but right now, her curiosity wins.

It’s easy to open, too: no creaky hinges or weird latch. It’s so satisfying, actually, that it takes her a second to identify what’s inside.
Hundreds of hexagonal chips with the same infinity symbol on them.

She picks one up to look closer, but that’s when Bellamy raps twice on the other window. He has in fact gotten his light out and is using it to direct cars around them, but he doesn’t look pleased with it. “Hurry up in there.”

Clarke sticks the chip in her pocket, then closes the box.

They bring the hazmat men to justice in the normal way.

That is, they frisk them thoroughly, zip tie their hands and feet, zip tie the zip ties to each other, and deposit them on the floor of the police station.


There is only one person currently at the Arkadia precinct police department. Surrounded by a halo of posters with slogans like *Drive Sober or Ruin Lives!* and *Protect Your City: Apply to the Police Academy Today!*, Marcus Kane looks like he’s one missed coffee away from using his paperwork as a pillow.

“You can’t keep doing this,” he says, not sounding like he minds all that much. Clarke relates: she wishes she could have someone show up at the ER and do *her* job for her for free, too.

“There were witnesses. Talk to, um—”

*Thelonious Jaha,* Raven says helpfully. “*Son, Wells.*”

“Thelonious Jaha, these guys busted up his whole house.”

Kane sighs and reaches for a form. “T-h-e-l… uh huh. What’d they take?”

“Box.” Clarke doesn’t hand it over. She tells herself that it’s because she wants to give it back to the Jahas personally, because she knows it will get bogged down in evidence or some other bureaucratic nonsense, but that’s not all the way true.

She just wants to know what those chips are. They look almost like code, and she’s willing to bet that Monty will be able to figure them out before the Polis PD.

“You’ll want to get their getaway car,” Bellamy says. “It’s got four flat tires, they had to leave it in the middle of the intersection on fourth and thirtyeth.”

“Trust me, I’ve been made aware. And *your* names are—?”

“Nice try.” His mask covers it up, but Clarke knows the glare that accompanies Bellamy’s tone. It’s actually pretty stupid looking, but she’s never told him that.

One of the guys groans. Tries to flop onto his back, but realizes that he’s tied to his buddies, and so he ends up just squinting up at the ceiling. “Wha—”

Bellamy leans into his line of sight.
“Ugh,” the guy groans. “Shit.”

“You’re in the police station,” Clarke says, her presence earning another shit. There aren’t a whole lot of things she’s proud of in life, but that reaction might be one of them. “Lying on shitty yellow linoleum, too. What’d you want with the box?”

“Don’t know… what…”

She crouches down over him, low enough that her hair falls forward, hitting the plastic sheet covering his face. It also gives him an up-close view of the black dots she’d added around the eyes of her mask: the mask is already black, but it gives it some texture, and Clarke was pleased with the result. It’s only fair that people get to appreciate it. “You went in there, you trashed everything, you hit a man in the head but you only came out with that box. Why?”

He keeps staring at her. She snaps her fingers in front of his eyes to make sure he’s still conscious: he is.

“You know who I am, right?”

Behind her, she can hear Bellamy sigh.

“Skylark,” the guy mutters. One of his friends is starting to twitch, and that’s no good: they’re easier to interrogate when they’re on their own.

“So you know what will happen if I put my hand on your chest, right?”

Kane’s sigh is even louder than Bellamy’s. “Anything he says after that isn’t admissible. Once Cartwig gets off her coffee break, we’ll… get them to Holding. Somehow.”

“Lark broke one of their legs,” Bellamy adds.

Kane faceplants into a stack of A4s, and Clarke thinks that this is a good time to make an exit. The door dings cheerfully behind them when they leave.

“I’ve got a mugging on sixth,” Miller says over the comm. There’s a pause, a few muffled thumps, then— “There is no longer a mugging on sixth. Are you okay, sir?”

Bellamy snickers. “Not really the time of night to go cruising for guys, Turret.”

Clarke smacks him on the arm.

“Don’t be jealous, Bell,” Raven chimes in.

“Let’s just get this back to the Jahas.” Clarke shakes the box, listening to the rattling sound as they start off down the street. “Maybe we should keep someone near their house for the next few days. There might be more where the hazmats came from.”

“What the hell is even in there?”

She hands him the box and slows so that he can look inside. “I don’t know what they are.” Pause. “I stole one.”

When they first met, back at Mount Weather Detention, Bellamy would have been the one doing the stealing and Clarke would have objected. When Tsing and her experiments had first come into their lives, the scales had flipped, a bit: Bellamy growing a moral compass just as Clarke felt like she was losing hers. But now he just nods, trusting her instinct, and she doesn’t know these days if
they’ve met in the middle or they’ve both hit bottom together.

“This is Turret. Mugging resolved.” Pause. “I also got his number.”

“You get ‘em, Nate.”

Bellamy snorts, dramatically enough that he may have gotten snot on the inside of his mask. “What are you going to do, go get coffee in full costume?”

“You know the best thing about infrared vision? I can tell when someone is getting hot.”

“The mighty Sky Crew,” Clarke says. “Fear of criminals and vagrants everywhere.” This only shuts them up for a second, and then Bellamy and Miller start arguing about whether or not checking someone’s body temperature constitutes an unlawful search. Raven tells them that she’s going to do an unlawful search of their rooms if they don’t stop cluttering the comms.

The ground feels like a fishbowl, and Clarke checks up and down the street once (one: man sitting at the bus stop, face in his kindle, three: teenagers smoking on a porch,) before poking Bellamy. “Back to the rooftops?”

“Whatever you want, princess.”

She doesn’t dignify that with a response. “I’ll lower a line once I’m up there. Hold on to the box.” She’s got a grappling hook with retractable wire tucked against her side. As far as they’ve been able to test, her gravity field can only reach an inch or so from her body, meaning that all her gear has to be strapped in close: if something gets loose, she’ll go plummeting to the earth, dragged by the weight of her gun or, in one case, an untied shoelace.

“Yep.”

She jumps, letting go at the peak, and the leftover momentum pushes her upwards and towards the cement wall. She catches it, uses it to keep pushing herself upwards until she catches the edge of the rooftop. Then she tenses again, and the ground has just enough pull on her that she can pull herself up and over without drifting off. Once at the top, she tosses down the weighted end of the grappling hook’s wire: it whirs happily at its freedom. She can’t see Bellamy connect it to the harness sewn into his pants and jacket, but—

“Got it.”

The device hums for a second after she flicks the recall switch, and then it reels itself in. Clarke doesn’t bother to fasten it to anything, just weighs down her leg on top of it and then leans back, studying the night sky. Maybe there’s a little bit of navy in the gross orange shade. Someday she’ll paint it, and she’ll call it, A Study in Shitty Streetlamps.

Once they fix the police department and the fire department and the roads and the schools then maybe they’ll be able to do something about the lights.

“Wire, the new harness is a little tight around the jewels.” Bellamy heaves himself over the side of the roof, and disconnects the line. “Please have somebody fix that.”

“I’ll put that on my not-to-do list right away.”

And then Clarke and Bellamy are running, not for their lives, just running because they can, running to get more air when they jump and that’s the best kind of running there is.
“I can’t thank you enough.” Thelonious Jaha strokes the lid of his box like it’s an injured kitten. Sometime in the last hour, a large Kermit the Frog Band-Aid has been stuck to his head. If he’d been to the ER, triage would have checked him for a concussion, but when Bellamy asked how he was feeling he had declared himself free of all pain, so she doesn’t press. “I can’t tell you how important this is.”

“Do you know why someone would want to steal it?” Clarke asks. Over Jaha’s shoulder she can see his son pause in his sweeping and roll his eyes.


“Alllllright.” Wells shakes his dustpan into a black plastic trash bag, then slings the bag over his shoulder. “I gotta toss this, so I’ll walk you two out.”

They make their way gingerly across the living room, trying to avoid broken glass and the wires from the sofa that seem to have gotten everywhere. Once on the porch, Wells looks with despair at the overturned trash can. There are wrappers and boxes spilled across the driveway.

Clarke hesitates, then jumps off the porch and pulls the bin upright so that Wells can deposit his bag of living room debris. “Are you guys going to be okay?”

“Yeah. Nothing ever phases him.” Wells glances back through the living room window, where his father is still cuddling the box. “Honestly, I kind of wish you hadn’t brought it back.”

“What is it?” Bellamy asks, but Wells just shrugs.

“He says it’s the answer to pain. I don’t know. He came home with it a few weeks ago, and has been acting weird since.”

“Do you know what’s inside?”

“Some chip things.” Wells sighs. “I should go back in; god knows he’s not going to get anything cleaned up.”

Clarke hasn’t seen her mother since Mount Weather, and they’ve always been strained: she doesn’t really know what a functioning parent-child relationship looks like. But she doesn’t think it’s this, a son old enough to move out still here, cleaning up a mess left by burglars. She wants to give him some sort of comfort, but she’s a stranger in a mask. She can run across rooftops to keep people safe, but she doesn’t have anything to offer them on the ground.

“Good luck,” she says. “If you need anything…”

“Yep.” Wells nods to both of them before trudging back inside.

“Shoulda asked him who else knew about his dad’s magic box.”

“He didn’t even know what they were. And I don’t think Jaha’s going to say much more.” Clarke sighs. “Whatever. We got the guys, right?”

“Right.”
“Hey, active crew. Shadow, Gunner and Snap are heading out, so you’re now officially off duty.”

Bellamy huffs again at the mention of his sister doing patrols, but he doesn’t say anything. Good. It’s a fight that they’ve had too many times.

“This is Skylark,” she says. “Me and Homer are coming in.”
Two Cities

Chapter Summary

She should have gone herself, but she’d had other things to be dealing with. Now, thanks to delegation, she can add a pissed off Sky Crew to that list.

As far as Tuesday mornings go, this one is not up to par.

Lexa wasn’t born in Polis, but Polis is hers. Its streets are her veins, its people her cells, all coming together to make one whole. A disaster of a whole, sometimes, but something living and breathing. Covered in scars, but indestructible. Full of a violence she can only just keep from spilling over.

She has brought relative piece to neighborhood gangs. And she had gotten Grounder Industries a military contract that now employs half the city: it’s sweet, really, what the US Military is willing to do for an army brat with blackmail in her blood. And what a failing company is willing to do for the kid two months shy of the drinking age who just got them the deal of a lifetime— give her a quarter of shares and the top floor of their tower to conduct her business, specifically. Oh, they’ll try and drive her out someday, when they want that floor back, but she’s been here for years now and she’ll see it coming a mile away. They’ll have to fight to take this view away from her, the window that looks out on the city and its veins and its life. She is Polis, and the reason Polis thrives.

Some people are due to be reminded of this.

“Did I not,” she says, affecting a calm she does not feel, “prevent Bluelake from encroaching on Tond Circle?”

The man in front of her glances down and to the left, tapping his fingers against his knee. She wants to clobber him in his stupid, bald head— no, she wants to throw him out her window, they’re only forty-three stories up, she—

She does not want to resort to violence because not having to resort to violence is why she hired his people in the first place.

“You did, Commander.”

“And did I not ensure that your son wasn’t fired, even when he was caught working in the factory while stoned to all hell?”

“Yes, Commander.”

“And then when I had you send some men on a fact finding mission, did your men then not proceed to cause significant damage, injure someone, and arouse the attention of Sky Crew, who then proceeded to capture said men and take away the evidence your men claim to have found?”

“I clearly need to do some culling of my—”

“Tristan!”
He looks up at her once, briefly. “Yes,” he mumbles.

“Can I assume that you will be making all parties responsible even more uncomfortable than I am making you now?”

He nods, with great enthusiasm.

“Excellent.”

And now he hesitates. She knows what he’s going to ask, it’s all over his face, but maybe he will take the wiser road and keep silent.

He doesn’t.

“But Sky Crew captured three of my men, and the little girl—” he freezes as Lexa raises one eyebrow “—young wom— young— grown— um, Skylark. She shattered Twitch’s leg. It’s going to take him months to fully recover, if he ever can. My people aren’t going to stand for that.”

She leans forward onto her elbows, across the desk. It’s a very shiny desk, good at showing when the person across from her has sweaty palms. “Your men were acting under my orders, making them, in this case, my men. And since it was my men that were attacked, I shall be the one to decide on retribution.”

Tristan goes back to picking at his knee. “It’s one thing when they only deal with their slum, but these kids have superpowers. People are scared of them, and if they think that I’m not going to seek revenge, they’ll think that I am, too. And then they’ll—”

“Sky Crew will be dealt with,” Lexa snaps. “And they don’t have superpowers. They are semi-successful experiments, and are justified in attacking strangers who cause damage on their own territory, which is why your men were supposed to be discreet. I’m sure they’ll have a lot of time in jail to think about why they should have listened to me in the first place. Your people will not take any action against Sky Crew without my order: their code names are bad enough. I will not have Polis turn into some Gotham-esque battleground. Dismissed.”

“Uh, actually, Metropolis had more superpowers—”

“Dismissed.”

Tristan leaves, and Lexa sighs, leaning back in her office chair. Gustus had once confided to her that being called to her top-floor office was a bit like being summoned to the principal as a child, and while she generally doesn’t like intimidating her own people— they’re useless if they don’t trust her, and she them— it sometimes has its advantages.

She wants to make a blowfish face and spin around in her wheely chair, but she’d trained herself out of such expressions of annoyance long ago. Instead, she texts Anya and Indra, asking them to come to her office immediately. In the meantime, she satisfies herself by reorganizing her post-it notes with extreme prejudice.

People all over the city have been talking about the new ‘City of Light’ drug. The moniker is a mouthful, but the symptoms are disturbing. The people who take it claim that they no longer feel pain— something she believes, after some very thorough questioning— but people have also reported behavior changes. Talking to someone who isn’t there. Disconnect from their friends and families. And nobody had been able to tell her where it’s coming from until last week.

But now that lead is blown to shit.
She should have gone herself, but she’d had other things to be dealing with. Now, thanks to delegation, she can add a pissed off Sky Crew to that list.

As far as Tuesday mornings go, this one is not up to par.

A knock on her door, and she leans back. Anya and Indra know her, have known her since she was small-boned and starving, but it still doesn’t do well to show them weakness.

“Yeah.”

They enter. Anya’s using her cane, which means she must be having an equally terrible day. Lexa can see pain in every line of her body as she sits down.

“Is Tristan cowed?” Indra asks. She stands behind her own chair until Lexa nods at her to sit.

“Well, he fought through his fear to lecture me about comic books.” For that alone she has half a mind to take him down, but she didn’t get this far making decisions on emotions alone.

“That little—”

“It’s fine, Indra. We already knew he passes no chance to try and one-up me.” She hadn’t realized he would be so petty about it, but men constantly disappoint her.

“Comic books,” Anya says. “He wants to move on Arkadia?”

“Yes.”

“If it came down to a fight, Sky Crew would obliterate Tond Circle. But if we let them, then the entire coalition would fall apart: Azgeda Park would ally with Bluelake and they’d turn on —”

Lexa raises a hand, and Indra falls silent. “I’m aware. I’ve ordered him not to attack Sky Crew, but that just means making them our problem instead of his. It was fine when it was just a slum, but the more Arkadia gentrifies, the more interested parties there are going to be. This was always going to happen eventually.”

“Sky Crew doesn’t seem interested in business.” Anya pulls out her tablet and taps around for a moment before putting it down on Lexa’s desk. A map of Arkadia, covered in dots. “Each dot is where they’ve had an altercation. All they seem to be is some unpaid, masked police officers: they even bring them in to the station.”

“Or they’re planning something,” Indra says, ever suspicious. “For all we know, they’re working for Wallace.”

Lexa zooms in on the map. There’s a clear spread of incidents, mostly centered around the Dropship building that Wallace’s JDs had been moved into a few years back. Between that and Sky Crew’s reported powers, it’s not a stretch to assume that they’re the remains of the Wallace Hundred—but it’s odd that no one else has reached the same conclusion, or acted on it if they had.

“Wallace is dead,” Anya says.

“Yeah, some people say.”

There’s only one precinct in Arkadia, and Lexa scans through the incident reports. A woman called Shadow who appears out of nowhere. A man named Snap who can light things on fire with a click of his fingers. A woman named Skylark who might be able to fly but is definitely the boss, and
Homer, her right hand man whose powers are unclear.

“We could take them out,” Indra says. “If it’s them against Tristan, we should side with Tristan. I don’t care what powers they have: none of them are bulletproof.”

Lexa doesn’t realize she’s reached down until she’s touching the scar on her stomach. “We don’t know that.”

“We do know we have better weapons, and a hundred times the people they do. They stick to Arkadia now, but eventually they’re going to spread out, and we could end up with another Skywalker situation.”

“Spacewalker,” Anya corrects. “But Indra’s right. We either need their alliance, or we need to take them out. Neutrality isn’t going to work much longer.”

Lexa nods, slowly. “Yes. A meeting with Skylark is overdue.” She prefers to do careful recon on new contacts, to know jobs and goals and weaknesses, but right now they don’t even have a name. Because they’d been minors at the time, the identities of Wallace inmates are sealed—they could put pressure on someone to unseal them, she supposes, or they could just go to the Dropship building and request audience. But invading their home would just make them defensive to start. Maybe… Lexa looks back at the police reports. “Anya, could one of your people get me the work schedule of Marcus Kane?”

Clarke has performed emergency surgery with a shiv and a box of tampons. She has sewn up, cauterized and cleaned more wounds than she can count.

But that’s not enough to get her out from behind the reception desk, since they prefer their ER workers to have actual degrees. And to get an actual degree, one has to go to an actual med school, and to go to med school, one has to go to college, and to go to college, one has to have spent their teen years actually attending the GED classes in juvie. And to get a GED while working, one has to take night classes, which one cannot do when one has vigilante-superhero obligations.

She’s not even sure she should be allowed to have this job, but there aren’t many people with fast typing speeds who don’t blanch at the sight of blood. Although the hypochondriacs with headaches might be worse.

“I’ve been here for three hours,” the man hisses, leaning on the counter. “When the hell is someone going to get to me?”

“I’m doing all I can.” Remain calm, Clarke. Calm. “You’re on the list, we just have to prioritize emergency patients.”

“And what if I have a brain tumor, huh?”

Then that sucks. “I think that elderly woman is about to steal your seat.”

Headache Man scrambles backwards to sit down again, and the old woman who had been eyeing his chair moves on. He’s now only about three feet away from Clarke, but that’s certainly better
than one. And she’s not being fair to him. He could be a perfectly nice guy, but the ER waiting room does things to people: it’s a weird liminal space that falls from chaos to quiet buzz and back up again on a regular but erratic basis. It’s quiet panic, loud panic, ugly chairs and fake plants. More than enough to make anyone lose their mind.

“I’m sorry about your head, man,” says the woman one chair down. “I have something that can help, if you’re interested.”

Ugh.

Clarke stands and leans over the counter. “I’m sorry, I can’t have you distributing unprescribed medications.”

The woman blinks at her. She seems way too calm for someone who is in the ER, but maybe she’s waiting for someone. Family and friends usually hit the zen state around hour seven—they’ve already done the panicked drive, had their person escorted away, heard some news, and then they’re just stuck in limbo and after a certain point, time is meaningless.

“They’re not medications,” the woman says, pulling an Altoids tin out of her purse. “It’s the key to the City of Light.”

Okay. This lady’s not zen. She’s either been staring at the fake ferns for too long, or she’s high as balls.

Sighing, Clarke leaves her desk fortress to look into the tin and find some way to confiscate it. Inside, resting on layers of colored tissue paper, is a small collection of chips. Identical to the one that she’d given Raven and Monty last night.

“That’s the key to the City of Light?” Clarke asks. Which is when the room starts flashing red as an ambulance pulls up. Clarke points at the woman—“hold that thought,” and then at the man—“do not take anything she gives you until I come back,” and then dives behind the desk to do intake as they wheel in the result of riding a hoverboard while drunk. When she returns to Headache Man and City of Light Lady, Headache Man is complaining about that kid getting priority—

“Because he had a head wound,” Clarke says.

“I have a head—”

“He was bleeding, copiously, from his noodle.” She could go Skylark on him right now. At least step on his toes a little. But she will be better than that. She will not blow her secret identity and lose her only job over one very annoying man with a headache. “Now tell me about the City of Light.”

“It’s a beautiful city, where everyone is accepted, and there is no pain.” The woman’s smile is genuine. “I can go there whenever I like. I’m there now.”

“So it’s in your head.”

“When I want it to be. Everyone’s there, all the other people who have had the keys—when we’re there, we’re all together, but even here there is no pain. Look.”

And then she’s reaching for a pen and Clarke just barely manages to grab her arm before the woman stabs it into her own leg. The woman is strong, but whatever this City of Light is, it loses to what Wallace stuck in Clarke’s system. She pries the pen away.
“Who are you waiting for, ma’am?” and she tries to stay as polite as possible. Tries not to say holy shit holy shit what is wrong with you please go to psych.

The woman smiles again. “Someone I can help.”

“Okay. Yep. I’m going to need you to do that somewhere else, the ER is for patients and their families and friends only.”

Clarke is half expecting her to insist that she’s everyone’s friend, but she just stands and leaves without comment, shooting a glare back at Clarke as she does.

“Mr. Rans?” A nurse approaches Headache Man, who is still staring after the woman. “We can see you now.”

He blinks, then seems to come back to himself. “It’s about damn time.”

Clarke turns back to her computer.

She needs to talk to Wells Jaha.

“The other guy just went back to his office,” Indra says, stowing her tablet. “We’re clear.”

Lexa reaches up to adjust her mask, then swings herself out of the car. Indra and Gustus follow her, walking in step, but just behind. Coordinated, threatening, while demonstrating who is in charge.

That’s the main purpose of her mask, too. The black leather goes around her eyes and then down her cheekbones in streaks, not to conceal her identity so much as separate it. There is Lexa the dealmaker, negotiating peace in nice clothes in a nice office, and then there is the Lexa who marches to war.

She walks into the station like she owns it, but Marcus Kane barely glances up from his computer. “If you want me to book anyone, you’re going to have to actually—” and then he does a double take, and goes quiet.

“Officer Kane.”

He stands. Off to a good start, this one. “Commander.”

What do the cops respond to, her face or her mask? It doesn’t matter, she supposes. “I need you to get a message to the vigilante they call Skylark.”

Kane’s eyes flit to the side… oh. He’s loyal to Sky Crew, albeit reluctantly. So she continues, “I don’t bear her or her people any ill will,” probably, “I just need to speak with her.” She should have said want, not need— she’s shown a little too much of her hand. But Kane either doesn’t pick up on it, or doesn’t notice: he’s still wary. His fingers are twitching. Not like Tristan’s, full of nervous energy, but with restrained intent. Which means there’s probably a gun nearby.

Lexa is not afraid of being shot. She is, however, a bit apprehensive about reactions to the aftermath. She trusts Indra and Gustus with her life, but not all of her secrets.
“What’s the message?” Kane asks slowly.

“You got a pen?”

He picks one up, and reaches for some hot pink post-it notes. When he’s ready, Lexa recites one of her burner phone numbers. He reads it back, and they nod at each other.

“If anyone uses that number that isn’t Skylark, I’m holding you personally responsible.”

Kane maintains eye contact. “I’ll give it to her people next time they come in. I don’t know when that will be.”

“Fine.” Lexa considers for a moment. “Also, ask her to please call between nine and seven on a weekday. Unless it’s a Wednesday, in which case, between one and midnight.” Those times are bullshit, but there are lots of things she can learn from a person by giving them instructions. If Skylark calls in a different time, she’s issuing a challenge. If she doesn’t call it all, she’s issuing a snub.

“Noted.” Kane scribbles that down. He’s still standing, and she can’t imagine that that’s a comfortable angle to write at, but she respects his need to hold his ground. Even if it’s an ugly ground. She should consider allocating money to the Arkadia precinct so they can replace their piss-colored floors.

“And tell her she has a week.”

“They don’t come in on a schedule.”

They stare at each other for another moment. “They’ve gotten to 911 calls before you do,” Lexa says. “I’m sure there’s a way you can get in touch. Have a nice night.” She turns on her heel and walks out, knowing that the other two will do so a few moments later to make sure that Kane doesn’t pull a weapon. But he won’t. He wanted to, but he’s a smart man, and either believes that she doesn’t mean Skylark any harm or likes Skylark’s chances in a fight.

“Have a nice night?” Indra repeats, once they’re back in the car. They had taken the black Prius: not ostentatious enough to draw attention, but shiny enough to show that they mean business. Also good for the environment. “Really?”

“It’s always good to be polite,” Lexa says, distracted. She watches from the window as Kane stares at the piece of paper for a moment before folding it several times and sticking it in his breast pocket. He turns back to his computer, and a moment later, Lexa turns back to the road. Gustus and Indra had arm-wrestled for shotgun earlier, and it’s Gustus that’s now in the back seat: Lexa can see him in the rear-view mirror. He’s got a hand on his gun.

Gustus usually has a hand on his gun.

She flicks on the headlights and pulls out into traffic, letting her city’s streets swallow them up.
Don't Let Them See You Bleed

Chapter Summary

Clarke wakes up on the ceiling.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Finn—bodies—gunshots—Tsing—Atom dies, gasping, and Finn shoots him in the head—“I want you to know that you’re very special to us,” he says—and then there’s a sharp pain in her shoulder and Clarke wakes up on the ceiling.

It’s not as disorienting as it used to be, but it’s not as common, either. She rolls over so that she’s facing it and then uses the popcorn texture to pull herself back over her bed. Then she rolls again and drops.

She’s spent a lot of time learning how to fall. Her bed is one of the better places to land.

According to her dad’s old watch, it’s going on four in the morning, but her dad’s old watch doesn’t keep very accurate time. Her cell phone says that it’s four-thirty, which isn’t much better. Clarke rolls over a few times—facing the window, where the crack in her blinds lets a little bit of orange street lamp through, or away from the window where she can see the shadows from her laptop charging light.

—Finn—bodies—gunshots—

(She hadn’t seen the gunshots, only the aftermath—)

—Atom dies, gasping, and Finn shoots him in the head—

(Finn hadn’t killed Atom, she had, as kindness—)

—I want you to know that you’re very special to us,—

And Clarke sits up, rolling off her covers. Itchy afghan and throw blanket that’s softer than should be possible on this earth. They’re always twined together like a churro when she wakes up, one big blanket log with her trapped inside.

—You’re very special to us—

Two steps from her bed to the door of her room, three steps to cross her kitchen and then her front door and her hand shakes on the knob when she opens it.

The hall is quiet. Of course it is. It’s fuck o’clock in the morning. Octavia, Harper and Bellamy should have taken over starting at two, if she remembers right—no, wrong. Bellamy is a security guard at the art museum in Easton, and he’s filling in a night shift. Connor is the one out there.

Monty should be awake. He’s on the radio tonight.
But when she gets to the apartment three-twelve at the end of the hall—the one that had been Finn’s until it had been forbidden until it had been Finn’s memorial until they had painted it and turned it into their command center—and unlocks the door, it’s not Monty sitting in front of the scanners but Raven. One of those UV Happy Lights is on the shelf, throwing everything into sharp relief. She’s leaning back in her chair with her arms crossed, fiddling with a broken bluetooth piece. Possibly the one Connor had shorted out last week.

“Hey,” Clarke says. “I thought Monty was on duty.”

A wave of the hand not holding the earpiece. “Bad pain night. Couldn’t sleep—told him to go to bed a couple hours ago. Anyway, he has work tomorrow, and I don’t, so…”

They both look down at Raven’s leg, as though it has something to say for itself.

Raven hates sympathy, though, so Clarke doesn’t say anything. Just takes the second chair and stares at the feeds.

“You could get a job, you know. I know we don’t act like it, but we could probably manage without you twenty four seven.”

“What, and lose the disability money that lets me live this life of luxury?” She gestures to the tiny room they’re in. Clarke just laughs.

“Quiet night?”

“Mm. Just a couple medical emergencies on the dispatch.” And there's nothing they can do for those. “What about you?”

“Huh?”

“Why are you gracing me with your presence at this unholy hour?”

Clarke shrugs. “Couldn’t fall back asleep.”

They’re both quiet for a moment.

“I’ve got a man running by with a purse that doesn’t match his outfit.” Octavia’s voice makes the light on the radio flash. “In pursuit.”

Raven hits the voice button on the mic. “You go, fashion police.”

It’s not hard to picture how this one is going to play out: Octavia running until she’s a good twenty feet in front of the purse snatcher. She’ll hold herself out of sight until he’s within a few feet, and then she’ll appear directly in his path. Possibly with a one-liner: she’s been watching way too much Buffy lately. The guy will either try and stop, and she’ll use his momentum to trip him up, or he’ll try and run straight into her and get his arm twisted around behind him until he drops the bag.

From the sounds of the scuffle, it sounds like the man has chosen the first option.

“What the fuck,” he’s saying. “What is wrong with you?” A pause, a jingle. Then, “no, lady, it’s not what you think—my friend left it in her car, I was running to get it for her—”

“Okay,” Octavia says. “What’s your friend’s name?”

“Uh—”
“Nancy?”

“No?”

“The name on this driver’s license isn’t Nancy, you idiot. Come on, up you get. Good thing we’re so close to the station, otherwise I’d have just zip tied you up like a log, written ‘purse snatcher,’ and left you here for someone to find.”

Clarke leans for the mic button. “I thought you’d said you’d stopped doing that.” She hadn’t been opposed to Octavia’s particular brand of justice, exactly, but then one zip-tied woman had bled through her pad during a six-hour stint on the sidewalk and Clarke had had to draw a line.

“Whoops, hi Skylark. Go back to bed.”

“What the—”

“I’m not talking to you, idiot. Siren, how bored are you?”

A pause. “Not not bored,” Harper says. She’s four blocks away from Octavia, according to the GPS, pacing around one of the slum buildings.

“You wanna return this purse before the woman freaks and cancels all her credit cards?”

Harper’s sigh is dramatic enough that it causes several seconds of static. “Aren’t you gonna need that as evidence?”

“Damn.”

Raven shakes her head. The comms go quiet again, with an occasional muffled complaint from Octavia at the slow gait of her thief.

Another few minutes tick away.

“You wanna talk about it?” Raven asks, appropos of nothing.

“What?”

“Why you can’t sleep.”

“Oh.” Clarke rubs at her eyes, trying to rub the last few images away. It doesn’t work like that, but it can’t hurt to try. “Nightmares. The usual.” Pause. “Finn.”

Silence. Static. Clarke closes her eyes, tries to focus on anything—the smell of pot drifting in through the vents, the ratty but incredibly comfortable chair she’s sitting in, the—

“It’s okay,” Raven says. “I dream about him too.”

Of course she would. They had longer together, years—he was the reason Raven came to them at all, helped them from the outside as they tried to escape—

“I just. I’ll never stop feeling like I failed him.” It’s the closest she’s going to get to apologizing, because if she does, she’ll have to admit to what she did and she doesn’t know if she can do that.

Sometimes, when she wakes up, she thinks she can feel his blood on her hands. Which is stupid. She hadn’t been with him when he died. And he hadn’t bled.
Raven looks at her like she’s going to say something, but that’s when Octavia’s feed spikes— just the jingle on the precinct door, but it breaks the moment. There’s muttered voices, and Clarke turns them up, just for something to do with her hands, her ears, her mind.

“—Purses,” Octavia is saying. “Had this one on him, couldn’t tell me the name on the driver’s license.”

“I found it,” she can hear the guy saying. It’s directed away from them— at the floor, maybe? At whoever is manning the desk?

“Sure you did. And you were running to give it back, right?” There’s some more muffled background noise, and Clarke is about to turn it down again, check in on Harper, when—

“Can you stick around for a minute? Marcus— um, Kane— wanted to talk to the next Sky Crew that came in here.”

Clarke goes for the mic. “Ask why.”

“Why?” Octavia asks, before muttering “No shit.”

“Didn’t say. Bill, go grab him while I book this guy.”

“I told you—” and it’s the dulcet tones of the purse guy again, “I didn’t do nothing!”

“Please, I’ve arrested you myself. Come on, bub. And it’s Shadow, right? Don’t… disappear.” Clarke can’t tell which cop is speaking, but she likes whoever it is. The sound of three steps of footsteps leading away.

“Shadow, did you disappear?”

There’s silence on the other end, and Clarke takes that as an affirmative. Octavia can’t actually turn invisible, though not for lack of trying on Tsing’s part: instead she can just sort of duck into shadows, blend into backgrounds, make it hard to see her without an incredible amount of focus. Between that and her speed, word on the street is that she can teleport.

That rumor had just made Octavia push herself to run faster.

“Shadow?” Clarke recognizes Kane’s voice only because she had been waiting for it: both she and Raven lean closer to the speaker, like that’s going to help anything.

A pause. “Officer.”

“Could you give this to Skylark for me, please?”

Raven looks at Clarke, mouths what?, but Clarke can only shrug.

“What is it?”

“A note. From the Commander.”

The Commander.

What Clarke knows about Commander Lexa is this: she united a dozen neighborhood gangs. When people don’t honor this peace, she has been known to personally beat them up.

What Clarke knows about Commander Lexa is this: she is not mayor, or even on the city council,
but people look to her as the actual leadership. If she wanted, she could become Polis’s youngest-ever mayor. This would give her the power to reform the police department and regulate rogue business.

What Clarke knows about Commander Lexa is this: she hasn’t done that.

What she doesn’t know is this: if Commander Lexa was the one who put the kill order on Finn.

What she doesn’t know is this: Who the hell calls themselves Commander anyway? Isn’t that an air force thing?

“I’m not touching that,” Octavia can be heard saying. “No offense.”

“She didn’t give it to me. She dictated. I wrote it down.”

A beat. “Skylark, you hearing this?”

Her hand is shaking when she hits the microphone. “I’m hearing this.”

“I’ve got no idea what’s on this paper.”

Clarke doesn’t think that someone could hide a GPS or a bomb on a sheet of paper, but she didn’t used to think she could float away, and she hasn’t gotten this far by— okay, she has gotten this far by being reckless. But paranoia has helped.

“Copy it over,” she says, looking to Raven. “You got the security cameras—?”

“I am insulted you have to ask.” Raven takes over one of the monitors. “I mean, credit where it’s due, it was Monty’s hack, but…” they get the black and white footage from the station. Octavia is standing in front of Kane, her hands on her hips.

“Copy the message?”

“Yeah.”

On the screen Octavia darts over to one of the boxes lining the walls— she grabs a form from it, and a pen, before returning to the desk.

“It’s a phone number,” she says. “And... some times that you’re allowed to call her?”

“She was very emphatic on that point,” Kane chimes in. “Also— uh, is Skylark listening? Can you tell her—”

“She’s listening.”

“Right. Well, some threats to my person were made, if that number gets out, so—”

“Tell him that if he doesn’t want that number getting out he should eat the post-it note.” Of course, if Kane is willing to eat the post it note then that means he probably hasn’t dipped it in poison or something. “Don’t actually—”

“Skylark says you should eat it.”

Clarke tries not to bang her head against the desk. Raven pats her on the shoulder, a little awkwardly.
“There there,” she says.

Aden is scowling at her from his place on the pastel blue mat. It’s adorable and not at all intimidating, and they’re going to have to work on that at some point in the future. Now, though—

“C’mon, back up you go.” She offers him a hand but he swats it away, getting back on his feet.

“You could just teach me how to shoot,” he complains.

“Yeah, that’s not a disaster waiting to happen. Come on, again.” Lexa raises the plastic gun, and he ducks under her arm, grabbing at her elbow—and then she’s got a blunt knife in his ribs.

“Not fair!” Aden whines. Lexa looks up at the low ceiling for patience and strength: it doesn’t offer any, but the florescent lights start making her head hurt, so she looks back down again. The only other person in the gym is Gustus, who has an expression not unlike a smirk on his face.

“I’m here to kidnap-slash-rob-slash-kill-slash-maim you, Aden. I’m not going to be fair. Now I just stabbed you.”

“Don’t see why that matters.” Something’s gotten him in a mood today. “I’ll just—”

“Aden.” She kneels then, lowers her voice. Gustus is out of earshot and wouldn’t dream of listening in even if he wasn’t, but she doesn’t want to take chances. “What is the most important thing you can do to keep yourself safe?”

“Alright, alright—”

“Tell me.”

“Don’t let them see you bleed,” he says, his voice dragging.

“Right. In a normal knife fight, someone's in the hospital and someone's in the ground. You—” she pokes him in the stomach. Finally, finally he cracks a smile. “You would survive a knife fight, or getting shot, but if they see your blood you’re going to have more dangerous problems. Ok? And I do not want anything to happen to you.”

He nods.

“Are you going to tell me what’s bothering you?”

Aden’s eyebrows go almost into his nose when he scrunches his face. Then after another moment of silence, he says, “Ms. T says that if I get caught fighting one more time she’s going to have to make a meeting with my mother.”

This again.

“Aden—”
“If they don’t want to fight me they shouldn’t disrespect me,” he says, drawing himself up and they’re not related (she has to remind herself of this regularly, they’re not related, she’s not his sister or his mother,) but Lexa can see herself in him. She’s sure he’s quoting her right now. “But what do we do if—”

Lexa has to resist the urge to pet his hair. He’s gotten to a point where he wouldn’t appreciate it. “If she wants to meet with your mother, we’ll send Anya, okay?”

“Anya’s not very— maternal.”

If anyone tries to hurt this precocious gem of a child, Lexa will remove all their organs, preserve them carefully, sell them on the black market and then use the money to get the rest of their body made into a lifelike taxidermy, which she will install as a target at the local shooting range.

“Then that will help explain why you’re so maladjusted, won’t it.” She pokes him in the stomach again and then stands. “Come on, let’s try this again.”

It was always a risk, sending him to school: it’s a private elementary in Fir Ridge, the safest available in their small city, with fences and security guards and the like. But that means he’s still out there, means there are people who know his name and his face, and while he knows to keep his connection to her a secret— but someone could always find out. And there’s always a chance that he’ll have an accident, get a bloody nose, and a teacher will panic at the sight of his blood and rush him to the hospital.

Lexa has people in the hospitals, she might be able to get a lid on it, but she’d rather it not come to that. The fewer people who know, the safer Aden is. The farther away he is, too, the safer. They’ve been looking, on and off, at boarding middle schools out of state. Top notch programs. Top notch security. Full of wealthy kids where it’s normal to have bodyguards. Aden’s in love with the idea, he’s got this notion that boarding school would be like Hogwarts or something, but—

He’s still got another two months before he graduates the fifth grade.

They have time.

And he’s not going anywhere until she’s sure he can defend himself against any kind of attack. So she pulls the plastic gun again, and again—

“Lexa. Your phone.” Gustus approaches, holding out one of her burner flip phones. It’s the one with the “SL” scribbled on it in silver sharpie.

She takes it. “Fill in for me here?”

He nods and turns to Aden and Lexa backpedals out of the gym and into the locker room. It’s six fifty-eight: her instructions had been to call before seven. Skylark is playing by Lexa’s rules, but only barely. She can recognize a middle finger when she’s given one.

The gym is closed to the public right now, but Lexa still checks all the stalls before flipping the phone open. She considers announcing herself as “Lexa” or “Commander” but on the off chance that Kane leaked the number she settles with, “Yeah?”

Pause. Static. “Marcus Kane said you wanted to talk to me.” Skylark’s words are carefully sharpened— trying to sound older, maybe. If Lexa hadn’t been sure she was between twenty-two and twenty-four, she might have fallen for it.

“Yes,” she says, and it takes a second to realize she’s changed her own voice, too. Silly— she does
not need to impress this girl. Skylark doesn’t know that she’s sitting in a tiny gym locker room wearing a novelty t-shirt and sweatpants. She’s got nothing to cover for. “Face to face.”

Another pause. “I think you would have me at a disadvantage there, Commander.”

“I wish you and your people no harm, Skylark.”

A huff comes out as a rush of white noise. “Then tell me what you want to talk about.”

If Lexa trusted her, it would make sense to tell her first, let her gather information. But Lexa doesn’t trust her. “Like I said, I’d rather talk face to face.”

Pause. Lexa can tell she’s not on speakerphone, but that doesn’t mean that none of Skylark’s people aren’t listening in, that they aren’t conferring right now.

“I’m not going alone.”

So that’s a yes. “I’d never ask you to,” Lexa says smoothly. “Bring two others. I’ll do the same.”

“Fine. Where?”

“The industrial district.” Lexa has been considering this for the past several days; she could give Sky Crew home field advantage to put them at ease, but her presence in Arkadia twice in as many weeks might tip someone off. And while she’s confident that she would be able to handle it if they walked into a trap—if Sky Crew was stupid enough to set a trap—she still doesn’t know what powers they’re hiding. Better not to risk it. “There’s a factory near the boundary line, where it meets Arkadia. Twenty-three Carey street. I’ll make sure it’s unlocked—meet me there tomorrow at eleven.”

“I can’t do tomorrow at eleven.” Skylark has real apology in her voice. Probably not trying to show her up, then. “Um, I get—I’m available after midnight.”

Late shift? Night shift? Interesting.

“One o’clock Thursday morning, then,” Lexa declares. She’ll either cancel her nine am meeting or buy stock in 5 Hour Energy. “Two guards.”

“Two guards,” Skylark mutters. “…Um, have a nice day?”

“Thanks.” Caught off guard, it slips out before Lexa can stop it. “Um, bye.”

She stares at the dumb flip phone for a moment after she’s closed it. Then she tries to put it in her pocket.

But these are her workout sweats, and they don’t have pockets.

It hits the floor instead, and she hopes nobody noticed.

Chapter End Notes

(I’m a little tempted to make Murphy’s superpower be "chainsaw dick", in the vein of bulletproof Lexa, but that might be too unsubtle. //massive side-eye at show.)
A Meeting of Shadows

Chapter Summary

Clarke isn’t sure if she’s supposed to say nice to meet you or go shake their hands or what. She’s good at beating people up and bossing them around; diplomacy is new.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Wednesday, so far, has gone something like this:

1. Clarke checks the time.
2. Clarke checks in a patient, pinging the nearest available doctor.
3. Clarke checks the time.
4. The day ticks down, closer and closer to the end of her shift, something she’s dreading and anticipating and she just wants it to be over.

Seven hours until the meeting. Six hours until the meeting. Five—

She imagines it, on the breaks between emergencies. Goes through her lists, again and again—Harper will have both tranqs and bullets, ready to fire either at a moment’s indication. Miller will have the same. Octavia will have knives and a silencer. Everyone else will be waiting, blocks or miles away, hanging on every word.

That conversation had gone something like this:

Bellamy: There’s no way you’re only bringing two guards.
Clarke: Yeah, no shit. I’m bringing two guards and Octavia.
Bellamy: Hell no.
Octavia: Hell yes.

*impassioned Blake-sibling glaring contest, and a brief debate about what their mother would have preferred*
Bellamy: Fine. Me, Octavia, and Miller.


Bellamy: *enraged spluttering*

It only makes sense. She knows Bellamy. Knows him better than she initially expected or wanted to. She knows that he would do anything to protect her, do anything and a half to protect Octavia, that he would die for any one of them, and that’s dangerous. Especially now. Especially meeting the Commander. He’s better off at home, listening on the radio. Telling Raven and Monroe (the van, five blocks away, armed,) if he feels them move when they shouldn’t.

It only makes sense, because Harper is a better shot than him. Miller will be able to see if Lexa has backup lying in wait. Harper will find a vantage point, ready to fire at Clarke’s signal. Or rady to bounce the soundwaves, make it sound like they’re coming from another direction, or to knock out everyone’s ear drums should that become necessary. And then Octavia can slip around behind them and stab the Coalition representatives in the back.

They will be fine. They will be fine. They will be—

“Gun shout wound, lower abdomen—!”

The man being rushed in has a distinct lack of medical proxies in his wake. Joy. Clarke loves getting insurance information from the critically wounded.

But he doesn’t look like he’s critically wounded. Instead, he’s trying to reassure the doctor that meets him, “there’s no rush as long as I can keep my insides in, really—”

So, there’s also that.

Clarke has tried to get in touch with Wells Jaha, to find a non-confrontational way of asking him about that City of Light his father is peddling. That has gone something like this:

Skye Larken: Mr. Jaha, it’s Skylark, I need to talk to you

(Read, 4:32 pm)

At some point she’s going to just show up at his house, but that’s going to have to wait, because once she’s done photocopying half a dozen insurance cards and badgering the ill and wounded with paperwork, she’s going to walk two blocks away from the hospital, ride the bus exactly one stop, then get off and into the van to drive to an empty bottle factory in the Industrial District.

In the meantime, it doesn’t seem like the City of Light is hurting anyone. Quite the opposite.

“I’m going to need your insurance card,” she says, trailing the man to his room. “And, um, for you to fill out some forms, once you can move your… hand.”
“Of course, of course,” he says, and his shoulder twitches like he’s about to wave his hand before he remembers that, yes, he does have to keep his organs in.

“Most polite gun victim ever,” one of the EMTs says when they leave, Clarke with the insurance information and the EMT with a weird story to tell his friends. “It was all, ‘we need to put pressure on the wound!’ ‘Here I can do it, I’d like to be helpful.’”

“Any idea what he took?” Clarke asks.

“Not a clue. Whatever it was, I want some.” He laughs a little. “Course, it’s dangerous as fuuuunfetti,” he says as they pass a little girl and her mother waiting outside one of the rooms. “What if your appendix burst or something? You’d have no idea.”

“Yeah,” Clarke says, realizing. “You’d have no idea.” Because if they don’t feel getting shot, they might not notice, say, being injected with trackers. She texts Raven with this idea back when she’s back behind her desk, and then there’s still three hours left and she hasn’t even worked through all of her anxiety.

_Breathe._

Relax, but don’t get too relaxed. That’s why the ER is perfect for her—she’s always aware, always on alert, always running from one crisis to another and that means that she can never loosen up.

It also means that the desk is currently creaking under the weight of her hand.

_Get it together, Griffin._

That’s when a car accident victim is brought in. She’s groaning in pain, and it’s strangely reassuring.

Pros of reaching the meeting place forty five minutes early: they have time to get in position. To scout the entrances and exits (main double doors, which are unlocked, as promised. Back door, a few feet behind a conveyor belt and a machine with pincers. They prop it open, just enough for Octavia to be able to get in and out. Side door, next to a huge bin of imperfect bottles. On the balcony level, at the top of the metal stairs, a fire escape. A door on the fourth wall that presumably leads farther into the factory: this one is locked.)

Harper finds the light switches near the pincer machine. She flips them, one at a time, lighting up different areas.

“Leave a few off for me,” Octavia complains. Her outline is fuzzy, going in and out against the smooth, sheet-metal side of a machine.

“You’re not here,” Clarke reminds her.

“Right.”

“More shadows are to our advantage, though,” Miller says. He’s pacing the wide lane cleared in front of a giant, garage-style door. “I’ll be able to see— they won’t.” Clarke nods to Harper, who flashes lights on and off until just that middle stretch is lit. Of course, the Coalition might not have
infrared vision, but there are such things as infrared goggles. But at least goggles are obvious, and Sky Crew would know they were compromised—Clarke doesn’t know what the word on the street is about Miller’s powers, but maybe the Commander doesn’t, either.

Her Skylark jacket, for all that it’s got a thin weave of Kevlar in the lining, was designed to be breathable. So that she could run and fight without turning into a heroic puddle of sweat.

Right now, she wishes it was a little warmer. Maybe it’s the thick concrete walls of the building. Maybe it’s fear. But whatever it is, it’s fucking cold, and Clarke rubs her arms.

“Siren, what’s your best vantage point?”

“On the balcony,” Harper says immediately. “I’ll leave the lights off. I won’t be able to catch your sound waves from up there, though, which means that I can’t keep them from hearing Shadow if she makes any noise.”

Octavia’s silence is rather pointed, Clarke thinks. “Okay. Take that position anyway.”

If Harper’s feet make any sound as she jogs up the stairs, she’s keeping it to herself.

Cons of reaching the meeting place early: now they have to wait.

Clarke paces.

Miller turns slowly in a circle.

Octavia lurks.

Harper sits.

Clarke paces.

Miller turns slowly in a circle.

Octavia lurks.

Harper sits.

Clarke paces—

“Three people in a car,” Miller breathes. “They’ve pulled over. One’s short, one’s huge, one’s… uh, normal sized, I guess—they’re pausing—” he glances back at Clarke, and his eyes widen. Then his voice drops even farther, barely audible even in their comms. “And there’s another climbing the walls of the building, crouching, I think he’s a sniper—”

“Shadow, be ready to take him out.”

“Kay.” It’s barely a clicking sound.

They wait.

Clarke stops pacing. She makes herself turn and face the front doors. Miller steps up next to her.

“Wire, Gunner,” he says. “It’s go time.”

“Roger that.” Monroe is using her most encouraging tone. "See you on the flip side."
The two doors open at once, and the huge one and the short one both dart inside, guns raised. Clarke doesn’t let her fingers twitch for her own, and now she’s glad she didn’t wear anything warmer because a sweat is breaking out on the back of her neck.

The Commander walks in.

She doesn’t go quickly to assess the potential threats— her guards have already done that. She just struts in like she owns the place— she does own the place— head high, hair loose, leather jacket, mask in place. The other two fall into step behind her, and then stop in unison, twenty feet from where Clarke and Miller are waiting.

Silence.

Everyone on the comm is holding their breath.

The Commander steps forward first. Two feet, three feet, seven feet, then stops.

“Skylark.” Her voice is higher and softer than Clarke had expected it to be. But that doesn’t mean she’s any less dangerous, and Clarke takes a breath before moving forward as well. The first two pawns in chess, she thinks wildly.

“Commander.”

The Commander tilts her head a little, indicating her companions. “Meet Gustus and Indra.”

Indra is the short one— a black woman who looks like she has the fight of a thousand suns coiled up inside her: her muscles are tensed, ready to move at a moment’s notice, although her face remains impassive. Gustus in contrast is a big man with a bigger beard, and what could either be a shadow or a face tattoo.

Clarke isn’t sure if she’s supposed to say nice to meet you or go shake their hands or what. She’s good at beating people up and bossing them around; diplomacy is new.

But she nods to the Commander’s people, and then waves a hand at Miller. “This is Turret.”

Lexa tilts her head to acknowledge him. “And your other?”

“Around.” They’ll be able to find Harper if they look hard enough, but hopefully it’ll be hard to shoot her if things go wrong. “So, you wanted to talk.”

“I think that is in both our best interests,” Lexa says. “There are new dangers that threaten us both.”

Yeah, Clarke’s aware. “Such as?”

They size each other up for another moment.

“What do you know about the City of Light?”
when they turn. Things that move in the dark that are all the more terrifying because you don’t know how they got there.

Octavia has always related to those monsters.

She, too, moves best in the darkness and she, too, was created to frighten.

The harsh lighting inside has thrown off her night vision, but the Commander’s extra goon is easy to spot: he blends in well with the shadows, but he’s got nothing on her. He’s crouching on a lower section of the building, maybe ten feet in the air instead of the high factory ceiling. There’s a window just above it, which throws just enough light for her to see the edge of his gun.

“I know that the City of Light claims to feel no pain,” Clarke is saying over the comm. “That people get there by ingesting some kind of chip.”

A waste, really. Someone finds a way to cure pain and they use it to create pod people. She wouldn’t mind not feeling any pain— Octavia is good at moving quietly, but getting up on that roof without making any noise is going to require at least one pull-up, and those are never comfortable. She starts to feel sorry for herself, but then the man moves a little bit, and she stops feeling sorry for herself. Damn.

It’s only a slight shift, but she can see his profile now, and the dude is fine as hell.

“I learned last week that the chips were being distributed by a man in Arkadia,” the Commander is saying. “I sent some men to investigate.”

He’s ripped, although his true figure is hard to determine with how many weapons are strapped to all available limbs. Shaved head, what looks like it might be a tattoo sleeve, and Octavia reminds herself that she is on a mission and distraction like this is why the Bond girls usually have to die. But it’s not her fault if she’s thirsty, okay, she is a twenty-one year old woman crammed in with an overprotective brother and pseudo-siblings with superpowers.

“You sent those goons?” Clarke’s on the defensive now: from the sound of her voice, she’s tense enough to start breaking the floor. That had happened once when she was arguing with Bellamy on a poorly made bridge. “They—”

“They did not follow my instructions. They were only there to observe. They turned out to be either woefully incompetent or bought by someone.”

Fortunately the bridge incident hadn’t given Octavia a fear of heights. Ideally she could get a running start and jump, but Hot Sniper will hear her, and they’d be stupid if they’re not on the lookout for someone (almost) invisible. Climbing it is.

“They beat up an old man— completely trashed his house—”

There are flecks of mortar under her nails when she rolls herself on to the roof. He doesn’t seem to hear.

“And those who caused the problems have been dealt with. Partially thanks to you.”

A tense silence: everyone on the comm has started breathing in sync, and Octavia matches them without thinking about it. How to stay calm. How to stay together. The guy out here, who she should probably stop objectifying because sexual frustration is no reason to start being a perv, must also be listening: he’s got his head tilted slightly.
“Is that a threat, Commander?”

Ooh, bad move, Clarke. This guy twitches a bit: maybe he’s surprised as well. Or maybe a fly landed on his nose. Octavia moves closer.

“No.” But the Commander just sounds amused. “I would like your help.”

What.

“I’m sorry,” Clarke says. “I thought you just said—”

“It was foolish to send my people into Arkadia when yours were already there. We should be helping each other, instead of—”

“Sending in goons.” A pause. “What does the City of Light do to people that you’re so worried about? It seems like it mostly just makes people a threat to themselves.”

And more annoying than ten Jehovah’s Witnesses and a Mormon, but nobody asked for Octavia’s opinion.

“To themselves?” The Commander asks.

“Well, yeah. You need at least some pain to stay alive. That’s how you know when you’re hungry. Or if one of your organs fails. Or they could cut themselves on a loose nail and pass out from blood loss before they ever noticed.” Another pause. Octavia realizes she might be hungry. Damn it, Clarke. “Why, what were you worried about?”

“Mind control.” Well, at least the Commander is being blunt. "They’ve done odd things they say they were told to do by a woman in red.”

Kinky.

“Odd things?” Clarke repeats. “Like what?”

“Nothing sinister so far, but it’s constant. Three people with no connection to each other were all told to stock up on ivory soap. Different dealers, different neighborhoods. Which means the woman in red—”

“—isn’t just an individual’s hallucination.” A beat, and Octavia wills Clarke to realize that she just interrupted the most powerful person in the city for the second time in a minute. Willpower is going strong today, because the next thing Clarke says is “er, sorry.” Which is its own new round of political issues, but it’s not like there’s many witnesses. Octavia, for example, is busy witnessing the flex of the sniper’s arm muscle as he adjusts his stance.

“You helped the Jahas,” the Commander says, either ignoring the interruption or acknowledging it silently. “They might speak to you.”

“So, I go and talk to them, get the information, pass it on and hope that I can trust you to not to manipulate it, not to make that woman in red say what you want her to?”

Another silence. They’re probably either glaring at each other or pulling weapons— but the sniper hasn’t fired, so he hasn’t been told to shoot or come in.

“You can trust me, Skylark.”

Clarke doesn’t answer. At first Octavia thinks they’re just glaring it out, but time passes by and
what is happening down there— she creeps close as she dares to the window. Clarke and the Commander are facing each other, both fiddling with their pockets—

“Shit,” the sniper says aloud.

“Did C— did Skylark just take her earpiece out?” Harper hisses. Miller grunts an affirmative.

Shit is right.

“Indra, what”— but the sniper cuts himself off, and whatever answer he gets makes him relax slightly. “Can you hear— damn.” Then he relaxes a little more, turns to Octavia, and says “what about you, can your side hear anything?”

Shit, that was cool. Inconvenient as fuck, of course, but cool. Octavia lets herself appear again, if only so he can see that she’s got a gun pointed at his head. He’s cool, but she’s cooler.

With her other hand, she reaches for the remote in her pocket and turns off her microphone. “Just my colleagues swearing,” she says. Is he checking her out? He’s either doing that or figuring out how to take her down in a fight, but Octavia has had to be pretty good at telling the difference, and she thinks it might be the first one. Damn her uniform sports bra. She wants to tell him that her boobs are more impressive than this, when they’re not pressed against her chest for prime crime-fighting capability, but that would be a little too forward. Also, he’s the enemy, and has a gun pointed at her friends. “How long did you know I was there?”

“Only when you got closer to the window.” There’s more light on his face from this angle—he looks either amused or impressed. “I’m a little ashamed.”

“Don’t be. I’m just really good.” Really, she has the better part of the deal. He has to watch the parley going on downstairs, but she has to watch him. “I’m Shadow.” She almost says Octavia. Why the hell did she almost say Octavia?

“Lincoln,” the guy says. “Nice to meet you.”

“You, too.” Not lowering the gun, Octavia gives him her most beautiful smile. “So, Lincoln. You from around here?”

“You can trust me, Skylark.”

The Commander takes another step forward—she reaches up and for a second Clarke wonders if she’s getting into fighting stance, but instead she is taking off her mask.

Like her voice, her face is younger than Clarke had expected.

She wonders if this is a show of trust. It’s not like her identity is a secret—although Clarke thinks, randomly, that she has never even heard Lexa’s last name—

Then Lexa is reaching for her ear, pulling out an earbud.

Indra’s hand tightens on her gun, then. “Commander—”
But she stops at Lexa’s raised hand.

*How can I get Bellamy to do that?* A car drives by outside—the noise makes everyone twitch. Whoever that is has no idea what’s going down in here, and Clarke wants to laugh at the absurdity of thought. But nothing here is funny. Lexa doesn’t look like she’s ever laughed in her life. And without thinking about it too hard, Clarke reaches up and takes out her own comm. Lexa watches. Clarke can’t tell if she’s surprised.

“How can I trust you?” she asks. “You have control over twelve of thirteen neighborhoods. You send men to attack our citizens. And what makes you think you can trust us?”

Maintaining eye contact is getting weird. In normal circumstances, talking to someone, she’d have relaxed into contrapposto, picked at her fingernails, looked off into the distance. This is exhausting.

“I don’t know if I can trust you,” Lexa says. “You have powers we can’t understand. We don’t know the full extent of what Wallace and Tsing did to you. You might not even know yourself. But if there’s anyone who is going to have experience with a substance that can change how a person thinks, how they feel, what they do, I think it’s Sky Crew. Is it not?”

And it’s not a shock that they’ve figured out who they are. There’s no reason to panic. There’s no reason for her to want to twitch at the sound of another car that goes by—and honestly, it’s after one in the morning on a weeknight—and there’s no reason for her hands to be pulling at her shoulder sockets, growing heavier and heavier. But she always gets heavier, when thinking about Wallace.

“Wallace and Tsing are dead,” she says. “You think there could be a connection?”

“I’d prefer to rule it out. I think you’re the only people that can do that. Tsing’s office burned, but it was still obvious that some of her file cabinets were empty.”

“And you think we have those files?”

The Commander raises her eyebrows just a little. “I think that you’re smart enough to want all the information on yourselves you can find, in case you start breaking down. I’m not asking you to hand it over,” she continues, anticipating the objection that Clarke was prepared to voice, very loudly. “But if you can check, see if there’s something we can use. If they knew of anyone else attempting such—invasive procedures. The City of Light didn’t just come out of nowhere. It must have taken years or more to develop.”

Clarke has never looked at those files, heaps of papers she keeps in a safe in her closet. There for health emergencies, but not anything else—she’d tried hiding the safe, for a while, so that she wouldn’t have to see. But that just made it seem even more, so now she uses it as a shoe shelf. “I’ll have to talk to my people,” she says. And Lexa has a lot less to lose than she does, but Clarke still reaches up and undoes her own mask, letting it drop to the floor. Then she edges forward a little bit more, like they’re playing some game of gang-leader chicken. “But know that the last person who tried to control us died horribly. Don’t make that mistake.”

Lexa doesn’t blink. “You know how to get in touch with me.”

Now they just have to get out of here. And Clarke doesn’t think that they’d go to all the trouble just to kill them if they didn’t get an immediate yes, but… “Call of your sniper.”

You can trust me, Lexa had said, while one of her men had a gun pointed at them.
“When you call off Shadow.”

You can trust me, Clarke had implied, while she sent an invisible woman to take out said man.

“And your sniper on the balcony.”

“You first.”

Lexa puts her ear piece back in, and Clarke mirrors her.

“—the hell, Skylark!” Harper is yelling. It must be very loud for her, up there— she can’t kill soundwaves, she just bounces them around her vicinity until they fizzle out.

“Siren, stand down.”

“…Roger.”

“Turret?”

“Turret?”

“Their sniper is out of position,” Miller says. “Headed down.”

“Shadow, come in,” Clarke orders, but she didn’t have to— the door behind Indra is already opening, and none of them have turned around but something on Clarke’s face must give away her confusion, because Lexa looks behind her. To where their sniper appears to be… holding the door open for Octavia?

The Commander turns back to her, and the expression on her face isn’t— there’s a crack in her facade, she’s got her eyebrows raised a bit and her mouth is twitching— it might be the first real expression Clarke has seen and somehow it’s that that makes her human, that makes Clarke think maybe this can work.

Chapter End Notes

So I’ve been reading a lot of fics on kindle lately, and the .mobi doesn't put in any line breaks or anything between notes and the chapter itself, so it can get kind of confusing. This note is to make future kindle readers suffer as I have suffered, and also to let you know that you can talk to me on tumblr.

Also, has anyone wanked an explanation for how a chip that is swallowed can end up in the back of your neck?
Orion

Chapter Summary

Since Lexa is not the type of person to be flip, she asks Gustus and Indra to elaborate on their scowls.

Harper is bleeding.

This is idiotic.

The most strenuous thing she’d done tonight had been to climb up onto a railing. But that was enough to open up the cut under her arm again, and she’s going to have to go get Clarke to sew it up, but it’s right under her bra strap so that means—

She closes her eyes and breathes in slowly, thinking that maybe if she opens them again there will be no blood on her undershirt, no blood on her bra.

But when she opens her eyes, the reddish-brown patches stare up at her like a Rorschach test.

It’s fine. Clarke has already seen her shirtless. Clarke had helped sew up some of her scars in the first place because how do you alter someone’s vocal cords? You cut her open.

Harper puts her clothes back on, blood and all, and shuffles down the hall to Clarke’s apartment. Across the hall, she can hear muffled voices from Bellamy’s— maybe the radio, maybe he’s talking with Octavia. Beautiful, beautiful Octavia, who wins the hearts of Coalition gunmen. She could take off her shirt and he wouldn’t draw back in horror.

Bellamy had suggested the name Siren, ostensibly because of her earsplitting scream. But Homer, he must have known, must have seen the truth all tangled up in irony: sirens were beautiful. Sirens were beautiful, but underneath they were monstrous. (Harper had asked him, later, if she could give him a blowjob. Just to prove to herself that she could do it— that if she wanted to be, she could be the kind of girl who could have anonymous sex even if she could never take her clothes off. He’d shrugged and said sure. She’d thought she needed practice, but it seemed like it would be weird to ask him again.)

Knock, knock, knock on Clarke’s door.

“Coming!”

There’s a series of thuds, and then the door is pulled open. Clarke kicks back and floats a little, pushed along by the door’s momentum. “What’s up?”

“I’m bleeding.”

“Shit. Close the door.”

Clarke is damp— she must have taken a shower already. Her hair is wet and frizzing up, curling where Harper knows it will dry into waves.
“It’s not a big deal,” Harper says. “It just won’t stop.”

The other girl has already gotten some first aid supplies out of the pantry, where other people would keep spices. Some tape, gauze and bandages. “It gonna need stitches?”

“I dunno. I put a band aid on it the other day, couldn’t do more ‘cause of the angle.” She’s done this enough to know to sit down in Clarke’s one kitchen chair— she’s able to take off her shirt, although she’s sure it doesn’t do the injury any favors.

“It’s under your bra strap,” Clarke says carefully, as though Harper doesn’t already know this. As though that’s not the whole reason she hadn’t come to Clarke when it first happened, because Clarke has seen her scars, her mutilated breasts, beyond where her vocal cords were to get a better angle. To make sure they’ve got it right. Remember, she’s very special to them.

(Harper knows she shouldn’t be this obsessed. She’s seen movies, where the ugly girl turns pretty when she learns to love herself. Read blog posts where the deformed talk about self acceptance and there are people out there for you and honestly, she’s a fucking superhero. She’s always had synesthesia, but now she can catch the color-sounds in her hands, bounce them around and braid them together. She is a superhero and she is powerful and she is a goddess but she also just wants to be loved.)

They’re sometimes referred to as the hundred, and it makes Clarke want to cry because there are only ten of them still alive, crammed into the command room. Octavia, Raven, Monroe and Miller are squeezed together on the sofa meant for two, with Harper perches like a bird on the arm rest. Jasper and Monty are sitting a heterosexual distance apart at their feet, already halfway through a bag of fruit roll-ups. Raven and Clarke have claimed the chairs by the monitors, which leaves Bellamy with the rickety footstool. They’ve thought about getting more furniture for this room, but it feels risky, like an invitation for someone to die.

“If we’re going to have a problem, it’s going to be Gustus,” Harper is saying. “I don’t think he unwrinkled his nose the whole time. When their other guy came back in with Octavia, I thought for a second he was gonna shoot them both— his hand twitched.”

“His name was Lincoln,” Octavia says. “He seemed cool.”

Now Bellamy is the one who wrinkles his nose.

“Indra is the one who said something when Lexa took out her earpiece, though.” Clarke is trying to sketch them, from what she remembers— but she’d been so focused on the Commander that Gustus is mostly a beard with some angry eyebrows. Indra is a little easier. She’d had a very memorable glare.

“Yeah, about that,” Miller says. “You haven’t said what happened when you both went radio silent.”

“Which was terrifying and you should never do again,” Raven adds.

Monty stops eating his fruit-roll ups and lets his mouth hang open. His tongue is purple. “You took out your bluetooth?”

“It seemed like the thing to do at the time.” This is not a great defense. “Look. The Commander took hers out first, and if I want to get her to trust us—”

“She also took off her mask,” Miller mutters.
“Clarke—”

“What? I wasn’t going to appear weak. The Commander looks like she sniffs out weakness and eats it for breakfast.” Clarke taps her pencil against Gustus’s beard a few times. “She told me that she knows that we were from Wallace and Tsing’s experiments, which… isn’t exactly a shock. She told me that— well. You heard the conversation about the City of Light. She was wondering if—” and she takes a deep breath. In, out. In, out. “There was anything in Tsing’s files. About mind control.”

“They didn’t mind control us,” Miller says, defensive.

Monty raises his hand. “I mean, computer brain here—”

“And there’s definitely something in my head,” Bellamy chimes in.

“There’s no muscles to disappear, I just have to focus—”

Miller crosses his arms. “Fine. I get it.”

“But we can’t give her the files either,” Bellamy says.

“Well, no.” Clarke is not an idiot. “She asked us to go through them. See if we can find anything that might be relevant. Problem is—”

“None of us are brain doctors.” Raven tilts her head back, resting her neck on the top of the chair. Her good leg is jiggling. Back and forth and back and forth.

“None of us are brain doctors,” Clarke agrees. She’s only leafed through some of it, before the nightmares got worse and her hands started floating. “I don’t know what half that stuff means.”

“Maybe someone from the ER?” Bellamy offers.

“They’re EMTs. And I’d have to explain.” Which would be a pretty funny conversation, but not one she wants to have. “I don’t trust any of them to look at this stuff, anyway.”

“There’s another option,” Raven says slowly. She’s still staring at the ceiling, and if the chair she was sitting on spun, Clarke has no doubt that Raven would be incredibly dizzy at this point. “We do know a neurologist.”

“We do?” Jasper asks.

Raven can’t mean— “No. No way.”

“Come on, Clarke. At this point I’m sure she’d drop everything for you.”

“No.” But it makes the most sense. It’s going to be another awkward conversation coming, and Clarke presses her palms against her eyes. Breathe in, breathe out.

“Who is it?” Monroe asks.

Clarke can’t say anything. The silence stretches out, out, until Bellamy breaks it.

“Her mother.”

If Lexa was the type of person to be flip, she her assessment of the mission would go thusly:
(Indra) found (Skylark) to be (rude)

(Gustus) found (The Commander) to be (impulsive)

(Lincoln) found (Shadow) to be (cute).

Since Lexa is not the type of person to be flip, she asks Gustus and Indra to elaborate on their scowls.

“The Sky girl was rude,” Indra says. “I don’t trust her.”

“Taking out your earpiece was risky and impulsive,” Gustus says. “I don’t trust them.”

“Lincoln?”

Lincoln has been standing in the doorway, arms crossed at the wrist, not speaking. He blinks twice — surprise at being addressed. “I talked to Shadow,” he says. “She seemed alright.”

“Thank you for that assessment,” Indra says, making it clear what she thinks of Lincoln’s opinions.

It’s well past three in the morning, and Lexa has a meeting in seven hours. She will not look exhausted in front of her people, but she does allow herself a bit of a sigh. “Alright. Everyone go home and get some sleep. I want full analysis and recommendations by tomorrow — er, tonight, but keep in mind that they’re recommendations.”

She always feels a little out of place, wearing her Commander garb and mask in an office that’s made for Dolce and Gabbana. But as soon as her cohort is gone, she can shower, change into fresh clothes, and… ugh, it’s Roan she’s meeting with in the morning. Anything having to do with Azgeda Park means that she has to be twice as fresh, twice as strong as anyone else.

If she was the type of person to engage in unnecessary emotional displays, she would bang her head against a pile of papers on her desk and fall asleep there. Instead, she waves her people out before keying herself into the side door.

There’s a bathroom, a bed and a closet on the other side, even though she does not live here. At least, she does her best not to live here. She and Aden have an apartment a few blocks away. But Titus’s job is to take care of Aden, and security’s job is to take care of Aden, and she had kissed him goodnight a few hours ago and said that she had a meeting and might not be there when he left for school. He said that that was fine, because that’s always fine, and this isn’t uncommon.

There’s no reason to feel bad. She is not his mother.

But she’s also got some work to finish up, so she budgets herself two hours of sleep.

It’s going to be a long day.

Clarke doesn’t sleep. Not after they agree to a (“Tentative, Clarke, we can’t trust her,” “Well no I’m not an idiot, Bell,”) alliance/agreement/team-up with the Commander, if not the Coalition. Not after Monroe goes back to her post-action push-ups, still audible through the wall (one hundred and twelve, one hundred thirteen, one hundred fourteen…)

She’s too wired, too— to something, she’s wearing her puffiest slippers to hold her down but she needs to be out there, she needs to move. She needs—

Her phone chirps. A facebook notification, but she doesn’t have a facebook, she—
Oh.

>>Wells Jaha has accepted your message request

> hey Skye, sorry I didn’t get this message till now. If this is about the book you borrowed, do you need it tonight? If so you can swing by the house and pick it up—you’re on the night shift right?

That’s something she can do. That’s definitely something she can do.

> Sure, be there asap.

When she sticks her head into the command room, Monty is playing Minecraft on one of the monitors. The other shows a steady lack of activity. Jasper had gone right back out, powered by a sip of red bull. The boy’s body is an overreactionary disaster, but it has its advantages.

“I’m headed out.”

Monty doesn’t look up from the castle he’s building. “It’s not your turn.”

“I got word from a contact.”

“Just don’t take your bluetooth out this time.”

They’re never going to let that one go.

“It’s not going to be on unless there’s an emergency. I’m not planning on fighting anyone.” Clarke grabs her mask and coat from the storage room and then crawls out the window. Pulls herself hand over hand to the roof, and gives herself a moment to breathe.

Breathing is amazing. Not in some new age white person yoga hipster way, but in a beautiful reminder that she is here and she is free and she had gone years thinking she’d never be on the other side of a fence again.

Then she had gone years thinking that she’d never get out of their cell block, die under Tsing’s knife not even able to remember the last time she went outside—

She runs.

Twelve minutes later, sweaty and exhilarated, she’s on top of the building next to the Jahas’ house, lying on her belly and looking down.

> I’m by the Spencer building.
For a given definition of ‘by’.

She can just barely see a head stuck out of a window of the house below. He looks around, side to side, and then up— she waves her phone, hoping he’ll pick up on the light. The phone dings again a second later.

*Meet you in a few.*

What.

Either that’s code for something or— no, she can see him on the front walk now, headed towards the Spencer building, and when she checks over the other side he’s just— letting himself in. Okay. That’s… very convenient.

Clarke pulls out her tranq gun, trains it on the door, and waits.

And waits.

And waits.

The door opens and Wells Jaha takes one look at her and his hands fly into the air. “Jesus, don’t shoot.”

“How did you get in here?”

“I work here?”

She lowers the gun. He doesn’t seem to be armed and she can take him in a fight if it comes to that. “What?”

“I’m the new assistant.” His scowl is just visible in the light from the stairwell. Then he lets the door fall shut behind him, and they’re just silhouettes, above the street lamps and under the moon. “My dad’s… friend got me the job.”

“You don’t sound happy about that.”

She can see Wells’s profile briefly as he looks around, as though they are not standing on a roof at four in the morning. “They’re watching me,” he hisses, drawing closer. “The friend is in the City of Light too, so he’s just watching me, all the damn day— I’ve started sleeping with duct tape over my mouth, in case he tries to chip me in my sleep.” He grabs onto her arm, and he’s shaking. “I’m so tired.”

“Okay.” Clarke pulls him a few steps over, so that he can sit on top of one of the fan boxes. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“You wanted to know about the City of Light, right?”

“Yeah.”

“If they find out I told you this— hell, you could be one of them, but if Skylark is in the City we’re
all fucked, aren’t we?” he starts to laugh then, the laugh of a man whose world is falling apart after a week without rest. “They’re a hive mind. The chip takes all your memories and plugs you into the Matrix or something, I don’t know— ok, no, they’re not a hive mind, but she is.”

“She?”

Wells’s breath is shaking more than he is. “My dad calls her Alie. She’s— it’s— the AI. She’s the one with all the information, so he can only see me when she lets him, but she knows everything, every memory of every chipped person. And she controls them and I don’t know what she wants but my dad’s stopped taking care of himself, he’s working on her missions all the time, her projects. I’d run away but I don’t have anywhere to go and I can’t leave him, she might forget he has to eat and he’d die, because he can’t feel hunger anymore—”

“Okay.” Clarke grabs his hand. She isn’t normally about touching strangers— or anyone— but he’d made a desperate bid for contact and if there’s nothing in his life that’s safe, maybe it’s something that he needs. “Breathe, okay?” Breath is wonderful, breath is life. “If you’re that afraid, you need to get out of there, I can find—”

He claps his other hand over her mouth and it takes a lot of effort not to put him in a chokehold.

“Don’t tell me. Don’t tell me because if they get me, then they’ll know everything you’ve said.” His hand is shaking even more now, but he lets her pry it away from her face.

“You’re lucky I didn’t break that arm.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I’m just—”

“You’re tired and paranoid. Trust me, I get it.”

Orion is sinking down over the horizon. Orion the hunter, arms outstretched, like he’s trying to pull himself back into the sky.

“I can’t trust you,” Wells says a moment later. His voice is steady now. “You can’t trust— you can’t trust anyone. Anyone could be chipped, spying on you for Alie. You wouldn’t even know.”

If one person finds out who she is, it won’t matter what she does to silence them, because then Alie and whoever Alie answers to will already know. God, she’s been so stupid, taking her mask off earlier, what if the Commander— but no, the Commander had her looking into this. But her guards—

Clarke’s people—

“So if Alie controls all of them,” she asks, “who controls Alie?”

There’s a motion next to her that might be a shrug. “I don’t know,” Wells says. “I guess I can— try and find out.”

“Don’t put yourself in danger.” Please, let us hide you.

He makes a noise halfway between a laugh and a sigh. “You know, I thought it was nice at first. That my dad had found some peace— he’s had a hard time. My mom left a few months ago, and I thought, you know, if this has helped him cope maybe it’ll help me too. But when I mentioned that to him he got this completely blank look on his face and asks who I’m talking about.”

Orion is sinking. “The chip takes away pain...”
“All of it. He was with my mom for twenty five years. It broke him when she left, but just— gone. Twenty five years, gone. I haven’t asked if he remembers my uncle or his parents. I don’t want to know. And it’s just gotten worse.”

What would it be like? To have no pain, to not be faced with Mount Weather when she closes her eyes, to not hear Cage’s screams, Finn’s screams—

It would be like being dead.

“You need to tell me, if you need anything,” she says after another minute.

“I can’t. You have to delete that facebook account, you won’t know if I’m me— hell, I won’t know if you’re you.”

“Shit.” Clarke wants to put her head in her hands, but she doesn’t know Wells enough to let her guard down that far. “Okay. I’m going to figure out a way to—” track them, detect who is chipped, “—fight this. Okay? But you need a way to get in touch with me. Let me know what’s going on.”

“Right.” Wells taps on the fan box a minute, the tinny sound swallowed up by the night. “Okay. I can leave you notes up here. Hidden in the fan box. Something innocuous, so I can say they just fell out of my pocket?”

“Shopping lists,” Clarke suggests.

“Right. Shopping lists. Toilet paper means meet me here at night— I’ll put the time in another item.”

“You need an SOS.”

“Hot sauce?”

“Sure.” Clarke looks around the roof. “It won’t be suspicious, you coming up here?”

“I’ll tell them I’ve taken up smoking.” Wells snorts. “Hell, maybe I’ll actually take up smoking. Smoking is supposed to calm you down, right? And my dad’ll know if I’m taking breaks, so I’ll have to sell it.”

Clarke wants to tell him not to destroy his lungs on her account, but it’s actually a pretty genius solution. “Cigarettes are good hiding places, if you unroll them right.”


That one makes her snort. “Do you think I’m ever unarmed?”

“Point.”

They’re quiet for another moment. A breeze picks up, and Clarke almost blows off the fan before she can weigh herself down.

“Thank you for helping,” she says, because it seems like the thing to say.

His breath is shaking again. “I just want my dad back.”

Yeah, Clarke thinks. Me too.
Lexa sweeps into the conference room at ten-oh-one sharp, suit ironed, circles under her eyes chased away by coffee and foundation.

Skylark still hasn’t called.

Not that she’s been checking her phone every few minutes.

“Roan,” she says, offering him a hand to shake. “Nice to see you.”

“Likewise. You look tired— late night?”

“The work never stops, I’m afraid.” Especially when Roan bounces in here, bright and chipper as the morning light streaming through the wall of windows. He’s immediately putting Lexa on the defensive, with that comment, and that’s never a good sign. It means that he’s got something that he doesn’t think she can argue with.

Or it could mean he got laid last night and isn’t thinking things through too carefully. Still, she’s wary as she pulls out a chair. One with her back to the window, so that he’ll have to squint in the light.

The sun will be less direct in fifteen minutes or so, but she can enjoy it while it lasts.

“So what brings you here this morning, Roan?”

“Just some standard business expansion plans.” His smile and shrug are just a little more smug than usual. So, not just some standard business expansion plans. He slides a comb-bound booklet at her across the table, and there’s nothing to do but pick it up and leaf through it.

Showing confusion would be weakness, but she has to go look at some of the headings twice.

“You want to open up… a four-star steak house, a Tiffany’s, and a Lush in one of the poorest parts of Arkadia?” Lexa flips the booklet closed and frowns at him.

“And that’s just to start with.” Another booklet is provided. “These are the plans for a membership-only gym, and a Nordstrom, and we’re in conversations with Whole Foods.”

Is he pranking her? Lexa eyes the second booklet, trying to figure out his angle. If they’re already in talks, that means that they have something to offer investors.

“And who do you think will be shopping at these high end stores in Arkadia, Roan?”

It’s question he’s been waiting for, and she regrets asking. It must be because she’s tired. She will not make that mistake again. Roan’s smile is Cheshire-esque and Lexa has the sense that a building she didn’t know existed is falling down on top of her.

“I’m so glad you asked.” He produces a third booklet. This one has a bright blue cover. She doesn’t open it. “There are a section of buildings in Arkadia, owned by an unregulated slum lord— small rooms, not adequate fire safety. Practically a tenement. Not very productive residents. He’s already agreed to sell the properties over to us. We’ll convert it to luxury condos. There are a few potential buyers interested: Arkadia could be the new Brooklyn. It’s got atmosphere, it’s got history, all it needs is to be spruced up a little.”

“And the current residents?”
“Well, there will be all these new businesses. We’ll need people to work there. I’m sure they’ll be pleased at the increased cash flow.”

Lexa leans forward. “I meant who live in your future luxury condos.” This can’t be a coincidence. She met with Sky Crew less than twelve hours ago, and Nia is trying to sell their home out from under them?

What’s her game?

“There are other crappy apartment buildings in Arkadia.” The for now goes unspoken. “Pardon my French.”

Breathe in, breathe out. Lexa slides the booklets back towards him, one at a time. “No.”

“No?”

“No, I’m not authorizing this.”

Roan puts both his elbows on the table and blinks at her with wide, faux-innocent eyes. “My mother isn’t asking for your permission, Lexa. You have no controlling interests in Arkadia—the Coalition has no presence there, so she doesn’t need approval to move forward.”

“Wrong. I’m in negotiations with Sky Crew, and throwing their neighbors into the street will undermine said negotiations. Tell Nia to come back in a year or two, and then we’ll talk.” After I’ve found an excuse to stab her in the face.

“Sky Crew is a group of thugs and vigilantes.”

“And you’ve been arrested six times for assault, so I wouldn’t go throwing stones. Sky Crew could be a powerful ally, and a powerful enemy.”

Roan’s sigh sounds put-upon and very fake. “Well, it would put us back, but I’m authorized to push our timeline back two weeks, as a… professional courtesy. If it will help your negotiations.”

Lexa stands. “That’s not a professional courtesy,” she says. “We are not equals, we are not colleagues. I am the leader of the Coalition, and you do answer to me.”

“All due respect.” Roan stands up as well. “But if you start telling the Coalition that we can’t invest on unclaimed territory, you might have a problem.”

“All due respect,” and Lexa inflects the middle word just enough to imply how much respect she thinks he’s due, “but if the other neighborhoods think that Arkadia is up for grabs, or if Sky Crew takes offense, I’m not going to be your biggest problem.”

“We can handle the rest of the Coalition. And Azgeda Park is not afraid of a group angry science projects.”

She’s going to lose this round. She knows it. But that doesn’t mean she’ll let him walk away, either. “You’ll push all plans back two months, not two weeks. Make sure to file copies with my office. Oh, and tell Ontari I say hi.”

It’s a low blow, mentioning Nia’s favorite protegee. But it makes Roan’s jaw clench and arm tense, and that’s all Lexa needs to know about how his relationship with his mother is faring.

“Two months,” he agrees. “Have a nice day, Commander.”
She does not wish him the same as he marches out of her conference room.

Jesus.

Lexa sits down slowly, and it’s only because she knows there are no cameras here that she lets herself make a face. There’s a leak or a spy somewhere—this timing can’t be a coincidence. And the way he had stared at her when he mentioned science experiments—

He can’t know.

Can he?

Because if he knows about her then it’s only a short step to knowing about Aden. And if Roan and Nia know about Aden, Lexa will be forced to arrange an accident, and she never likes doing that. Power vacuums are a bitch.

She pulls out her phone to text Anya and Indra, but that’s when the burner rings. Lexa chooses to believe that that means at least someone in the universe is looking out for her. Stupid, to not get a number so she could contact Skylark herself.

Flip phones are so satisfying to open and close. It’s the one feature that she misses. “Yeah?”

“Commander.” It’s a relief to hear Skylark’s voice, even though no one else with a blocked line would have this number. “We need to talk,” Skylark says, at the same time Lexa says “We need to meet.” For a second, she can just hear the soft buzz of the connection.

“I know a place,” Skylark says. “How soon are you free?”

She’s got two more meetings, a full debrief on the meeting last night, and she wants to make sure to see Aden at least once today. But if she pushes Gustus, Indra and Lincoln up, moves the meetings until—tomorrow? The day after? Whatever, her calendar is Ken’s problem—then she should be clear in, “maybe two hours?”

“I’ll text you an address.”

Her city’s heart is beating away on the ground. Or maybe that’s just the pounding in Lexa’s head. “Please tell me the place you know has good coffee.”

“Okay. I’ll text you a different address.” There’s a weird sound, and it takes a moment to realize that is Skylark’s laugh. “You didn’t sleep either?”

Well, Skylark’s hobbies mean she’s probably far more used to nighttime hours. “I’ll send you a time when I can get one.”

“Great. See you then.”

Lexa closes the phone with her chin and stares at it for several moments after they’ve hung up.

It’s a good thing she’s Gustus and Indra’s boss, because it means they’ll have to keep their complaints to themselves.
Cream of the Crop

Chapter Summary

She’s in pain.
Thank God.

All of them have pain. All of them could be tempted by the City of Light, and Clarke had planned on calling a meeting but Wells is right, they’re going to have to compartmentalize. And she hates that. They went into this together. She’s not Lexa, with secret missions and untrustworthy lackies. They’re her family.

Don’t trust anyone.

So Clarke bursts into Raven’s apartment. There’s no one in the living area, not counting the Commodore 64 that Raven calls William — but the bedroom light is on. The door hangs open, showing Raven sprawled across some stormtrooper-helmet pillows, her face washed out from the white light of her laptop. She looks up when Clarke is close enough that her footsteps can be heard over the live studio audience, smile turning to worry.

“Clarke, what’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry,” Clarke says, and punches Raven in the leg.

“Holy Jesus FUCK.” Raven reaches out, but her arm is twitching. Clarke hates herself, even as she turns on a flashlight to peer into Raven’s pupils. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

She’s in pain.
Thank God.

“I’m sorry,” Clarke says again.

“Sorry?” Raven pushes herself into a sitting position. “What the fuck? No, you cannot sit down, what the hell?”

Clarke freezes from where she had been about to help herself to Raven’s chair, panic quickly giving way to guilt.

“I had to make sure that you weren’t chipped,” she says. “I was talking to Wells Jaha…”

Raven fumbles at her pillow for a moment before pulling out a bottle of ibuprofen from underneath it. “Go on,” she says, when she realized that Clarke has stopped speaking. “I’m fucking excited to hear this.”

Right. “When people take the chip, all their memories get— downloaded? Or something? To this AI… thing, and they become like, a hive mind. So if one of them knows something, they all know it.”

“I know what a hive mind is, Griffin.” Raven swallows four pills dry. “Don’t see what that has to
do with punching me.”

Clarke looks at the floor. It’s not covered with a carpet of dirty clothes like her own is, but then, Raven would have a lot more trouble picking them up. “I was going to ask you to find a way to detect who’s chipped or not, but he just got me paranoid, and I was afraid—”

“You were afraid that the cripple was easy bait for the miracle cure. I get it.” It’s hard to tell, with Raven, if that last bit was biting sarcasm or angry recognition. Either way, she’s still pissed. Which is good. People in the City of Light don’t get pissed either. “But in what fucked up world do you think I would buy into that crap?”

“I don’t know. I’m sorry.” She is. What she doesn’t know is if she regrets it.

“Yeah.” Raven makes a face. “So, what do you want from me?”

“I need to know if there’s a way we can track them. Detect who’s chipped, or when they’re nearby. Monty has the one I found—”

“—Are you going to punch him too?”

Clarke considers. “Probably,” she says, which seems to make Raven feel better. She leans back against the wall, against a hand-drawn diagram that frames her head like some sort of mechanical halo.

“Well, after you’ve done that, send him in here.”

“Okay.” Clarke is moving for the door, but— “And can you not tell anyone else about this, until it works? If something happens—”

“You don’t want the robot overlord to know we can find them. I get it. I’m still mad at you.”

It’s the best she can hope for, really.

So she leaves.

Monty usually works from his room, getting paid by companies to help secure their websites. He jokes that at least Wallace gave him a job skill, albeit a racist one (“The Asian techhead? Couldn’t I at least be a martial arts master?”) but Clarke knew him before, during and after. She doubts that anything he gets paid for isn’t something he could have done. It takes a special skill set to get an oil exec’s credit card information and make a donation to conservation groups on his behalf— even though Monty is mostly upset that he got caught.

She’s halfway down the hall when she collides with Bellamy, who did not look both ways before stepping out of his room.

“Shit,” they both say at the same time. “Sorry.”

“No worries,” they continue, brushing themselves off.

“What are you doing up this early?” Bellamy asks, and Clarke wants to laugh. She hasn’t slept since before they met with the Commander— shit, she’s going to have to call her in a few minutes, tell her about the mind control.

“Time is meaningless,” she says as seriously as she can. Because if she starts thinking about exhaustion, it’ll squeeze her brains out. That’s science. “Early shift?”
“Early shift,” he agrees, indicating his guard uniform. “What’s going on?”

“What?”

“Monty said you went out—”

Clarke glances around then shoves him back into his apartment, following close behind. Compartmentalize. But if Bellamy doesn’t know what’s going on, Bellamy might fuck everything up, and she’s going to need him on this.

She tends to need him on everything.

Raven’s apartment is an organized disaster, but Bellamy’s is just a disaster. The only thing organized is his bookshelf and his box of weapons, which he leaves on the counter next to the refrigerator. There are bumperstickers on the black plastic lid.

When he’s not looking, she kicks him in the crotch. He wouldn’t ever take the chip, she’s sure of that, but it seems only fair to Raven somehow.

In a low voice, Clarke fills him in on her conversation with Wells after he stops swearing. “Don’t tell anyone,” is her grand conclusion. “I have to go punch Monty next, then he and Raven are going to work on a way to detect it.”

“Why don’t you just punch everyone?” Bellamy groans, patting covering his crotch with one hand and checking the time on his phone with the other. “I have to go in a sec.”

“It’s not a very scientific method,” she admits. “Just… watch your back out there, okay?”

After Bellamy leaves, she falls face first onto her bed. One hour, she thinks. Then she’ll call Lexa.

Please tell me the place you know has good coffee.
Okay, I’ll text you a different address.

She’d suggested this Starbucks because it is the only Starbucks in Arkadia. Situated on the slightly nicer end, it features huge crowds, a low chance of anyone overhearing their conversation, and a round table with a corner-shaped bench in the back meaning she and the Commander could sit next to instead of across from each other and both get a good eye on the room.

To claim this spot, Clarke gets there a full hour early.

Five minutes in, a barista puts a new pitcher of cream on her table.

Ten minutes in, she orders a cookie and a latte.

Twenty minutes in, there’s been almost a full change in patrons— it coincided with the hour. Work schedules? Nobody here looks like an undercover Coalition member, but then, that would defeat the purpose of being undercover. There’s two girls reading a newspaper, periodically handing sections back and forth. A man on a laptop, with three empty cups lined up next to him like shot glasses. A gaggle of high school kids on lunch break, checking their phones every few seconds to make sure that they aren’t running late.
Thirty minutes in, she orders another latte. A few stragglers from the group of kids are ahead of her in line, deliberating on donuts.

Clarke had only made it a few weeks into her freshman year when she was arrested and subsequently expelled. These kids could be her, in another life, if her father had kept his head down and—

But he would never have done that. If she hadn’t offered to help—

But she would have never done that.

These kids could never have been her, and she gets so distracted watching them leave (stupid, rookie) that she almost misses when Lexa comes in. She almost misses Lexa because the Commander has straightened her hair and donned a beanie. Her jeans don’t fit quite right, and to top it off, she’s wearing a Polis Community College t-shirt with a hole in one sleeve. She looks approachable. She looks like someone Clarke would start a conversation with at work, maybe, when she spots Clarke and waves. Her stance is different, shoulders a little raised, squeezing between chairs with all the air of someone who is meeting a friend for coffee.

Then she sits, and brushes off the underpaid millennial like one of the flies buzzing around their heads.

“Skylark,” the Commander says, dipping her chin a little.

“Hi,” Clarke says. “You know, what’s the point in setting a time if we’re both going to be grossly early?”

Lexa just blinks at her. “Have you ordered?”

“Yeah. It should be coming out—”

“Skye!” the Barista calls.

“—Yep.”

Lexa trails her when she goes to pick it up, getting in line. The Commander. Waiting in line for coffee. Clarke takes a moment to appreciate that as she makes her way back to their seats. The Commander stance has been dropped again—Lexa is tapping her foot as the man ahead of her takes his sweet time, glancing back to Clarke every few moments and raising her eyebrows, like, friend I’m having a casual cup of coffee with, can you believe this man?

Men are useless, friend I am friends with, Clarke tries to signal back with an combination of eyebrows and a blowfish face.

Lexa orders under the name Alex.

“I thought it would be funny, and fit with your theme,” she says when Clarke asks about it. “I’ve never understood why you guys pick names that are related to what you can do. It gives away the element of surprise, and some of your advantage.”

“So what would your superhero alter ego be named, Commander?”

Lexa thinks for a few moment, blowing on her coffee. “Susan.”

She had expected something like ‘Agent X’ or ‘Lima Echo.’ “Seriously?”
“Yeah. You name a girl Siren, no one is surprised when she blasts their eardrums out. And no one thinks Turret is the one who can fly. But if you were running around calling each other Susan and Fred and Bob, you’d be able to catch them off guard.”

“Homer thought we should all take the names of the gods, but that’s the kind of thing they strike you down for.” Clarke sips at her own latte. She normally saves up to get one a month: two in one day is extravagant, and she will appreciate it for as long as she can, despite the circumstances. “I hope your news is better than mine.”

“I doubt it. I met with Roan Frost this morning. Nia’s son.”

“The Ice Queen,” Clarke mutters. “Yay.”

“Indeed.” Lexa takes a gulp of coffee, grimaces, and puts it back down. “She has… arranged to buy many buildings in Arkadia, and gentrify them. I’ve ordered them to stall for two months, but since Arkadia is not a member of the Coalition, I do not have any grounds for forbidding it. I told them that we were in talks, but given Nia’s desire to undermine me whenever she can—”

“Yeah.” There are so many people in Arkadia, and Clarke has made herself responsible for them, when they’d declared themselves Arkadia’s protectors and her their leader. “She realizes that she can’t just buy a building and—”

“Skylark.” Lexa says it gently enough that Clarke wishes for a second she could cut the word in half, hear Lexa say her name, wonders what that would sound like— “The first building on Nia’s list is yours.”

Their tiny rooms, their downstairs neighbors that Clarke only knows in passing, and is it a coincidence? Of course it’s not a coincidence. “But the city—”

“The city is paying your rent for as long as you stay there. In theory you might be able to convince them that that would still apply even as the space is converted into condos, but by then Nia will have determined who you are and already arranged your assassination.”

“She would try,” Clarke says without thinking, even as she feels the jolt go through her. None of them are bulletproof. And Raven— she takes a deep breath, and tries to look like she’s still in casual conversation. “What can we do?”

Lexa shakes her head. “Right now, nothing. I’m—” she pauses as a siren goes by outside. “—working on it.”


“Because I think that having one of my neighborhoods invading yours would undermine the alliance we are hoping to build here. Also, if I allow this, the other neighborhoods are going to be mad.” Lexa tilts her head slightly to one side. “Also, because Nia is a bitch and I want to make her life more difficult.”

It’s shit news, but Clarke grins anyway. “Why Commander I do declare—”

“—Something I will deny ever having said.” Lexa flicks a fly off the back of her hand and takes another sip. “I hope your news is better than this coffee. I asked for cream.”

“There’s some—” Clarke starts to wave to the pitcher that had been placed on her table earlier, but she’s looking at it, and realizing— “Lexa.”
There are twenty two people in here. But she can still see the other tables, see that—

Lexa pauses, hand on the pitcher.

“None of the other tables have open cream,” Clarke says quietly. “Someone put it— it was the short barista with the undercut— put it here shortly after I got here.”

“Did you drink it?”

“No I don’t…” If someone is poisoning them, they’re being sloppy. The man with the empty cups has been here as long as she has— he’s on his fifth, now— and the newspaper girls are still here, but everybody else has shifted. A dad and twin toddlers are the closest to them, but aren’t paying any attention.

“And I know you didn’t do it because?” Lexa raises an eyebrow.

“Um, I warned you?”

Lexa sideeyes her for another moment, then turns her glare to the offending pitcher. Before Clarke can blink, the Commander has trapped a fly under her palm and flicked it into the milk. It bobs, little legs wiggling. “Well we can’t leave anyone else to get poisoned,” she says, before standing up and making her way back to the counter. “Excuse me,” she says, voice sweeter than the cream. “But there’s a fly in here.”

“Well that’s gross,” says the Barista. She’s not the one with the undercut. “I’ll take care of that for you. Can I give you a cookie or something, free of charge?”

Lexa’s giggle is, frankly, disturbing. “No, I’m trying to watch the belly. But thank you so much!”

“You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

Are they flirting? Is that what is happening here?

“Aw, you’re so sweet. I hope you have a great day!” Lexa waves, then turns back to Clarke, making let’s go eyebrows.

They’re going to leave, and they’re going to be the least intimidating people in the store. Clarke sidles up to Lexa, sighing like she’d wanted to stay. “I gotta negotiate for a longer lunch break. Trevor gets a whole twenty minutes extra before the start of his shift.”

“You should go for it. This boss seems more reasonable than the last one.” Lexa laughs again. “What did he keep asking you to do?”

Jerk. “Manage his anime blog. I mean, really? I was a personal assistant, not a personal life assistant.”

“Better than mine.” Lexa falls behind her as they squeeze between a couple tables, but is by her side again when they reach the door. “If I never schedule another playdate in my life, I can die happy.”

“Fuck men,” Clarke agrees. She shoves the glass door open with her shoulder.

Lexa winks at her. “I don’t.”

What.
It takes a moment to realize that Lexa is already a couple steps ahead of her, and Clarke lets the door fall shut as she hurries after her. She doesn’t know how to keep carrying their fake conversation, but it turns out it doesn’t need to. Lexa glances behind her once, and then jerks Clarke around the corner of the Starbucks.

“Who knew you were going to be there?” she hisses, all Commander once again.

Clarke twists out of her grasp and is halfway towards breaking Lexa’s nose before she processes the question. “Nobody,” she snaps back. Then considers. “I mean, Homer knows where I am, but— on your side?”

Lexa relaxes a little, slumps against the narrow alley wall. All Clarke wants is to jump, climb up walls and onto the rooftops, because she’s surrounded— “Just Gustus, Anya and Indra,” Lexa says. “But they would never.”

Gustus, whose hand was always on his gun. Indra, a second away from a reign of fury. Anya—Clarke doesn’t actually know anything about Anya. But they are all loyal to Lexa, and if nothing else, they seem capable enough that their poisoning attempts wouldn’t be so sloppy.

(Why did she wear the hoodie? It hangs far enough from her body that it keeps her earthbound.)

“It might not have been anyone we know,” Clarke says, trying to get in control of her heartbeat. “What I was going to tell you—” she explains about the memories.

“Christ.” Lexa jerks her head to one side and they move deeper into the alleyway. Not loitering suspiciously, just taking a shortcut. Even with the hoodie, it’s narrow enough that Clarke could starfish-walk up between the buildings, but she has a feeling Lexa wouldn’t appreciate it. “An army of mind controlled soldiers that feel no pain.”

Yeah.

“I’ve got one of my people working on something,” Clarke says. “I’m not going to tell you what, just in case, but if it works—” they come out between two buildings onto the main sidewalk again, and both pause, unsure of where to go next.

“You trust this person?”

“Well, I punched her in an old injury to make sure she wasn’t chipped. So— she may never talk to me again, but I trust her.” Maybe the pronouns were too much, but it’s not like Wire is a known entity.

“You didn’t punch me,” Lexa notes.

“If you’re chipped we’re dead anyway.” Clarke echoes Wells’s words to her from— was it this morning? It was this morning. Her sense of time is getting so fucked up from lack of sleep. There’s a kid being pushed down the street in a stroller, snoring away.

Lucky kid.

“I’ll keep working on Azgeda,” Lexa says when the kid and his mom are a safe distance away. “Let me know when you know about your… whatever you’re doing with the chips.”

“I will.”

They nod at each other, a little awkward. Clarke turns towards home, but she only makes it two
steps before Lexa speaks again. “Stay safe, Skylark.”

She looks back. “You, too.”
Occam's Razor

Chapter Summary

Occam would be just as lost as she is.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Occam’s Razor: the idea that the simplest solution is probably the correct one.

Hypothesis: The one who sat unattended next to the cream— a dab of which is currently in a lab Lexa trusts, and who should be calling her any second— for an indeterminate length of time, who suggested the location and may be friendly with the baristas, is the culprit. Skylark could have easily changed her mind about the poisoning when she learned Lexa was on her side against Nia, leading to her warning.

Occam’s Six Blade Shave System: The simplest solution, but with flair and intrigue.

Hypothesis: Roan, in an attempt to win his mother’s favor, deployed one of Azgeda Park’s minions. Said minion was smart enough to figure out where Lexa was going and who she was meeting, and then hinged the whole plan on the bet that Lexa would take cream in her coffee.

Revision of the abstract: Occam’s Six Blade Shave System is when one takes a simple question and comes up with a flashy but incredibly convoluted and implausible answer.

Something Occam Never Theorized: the simplest solution is the one that involves mind control. Skylark has been investigating the City of Light. Skylark was in the coffee shop for a good bit of time. If even one person from the City of Light knew her face, then any other chipped person could have set the plan in motion. Lexa could have been a happy accident.

But assassination via poisoned cream seems lazy, for an entity that can control— at a hopeful estimate— dozens of people. If they’d figured out who Skylark was, surely they’d be able to get to the rest of Sky Crew as well. Surely they’d organize a better plan of attack.

Occam, Lexa is sure, would be just as lost as she is. She’s been pacing her office for the last hour, trying to wear down the edges of the rug so that it matches the middle.

Only Anya, Indra and Gustus knew where she was going and who she was going to meet. The chances of a leak were almost nonexistent. Even if someone knew she was going to that particular Starbucks to meet that particular Superhero, they would have to be able to identify Skylark among the half-dozen other blonde women of a similar age.

So.

Skylark tried to poison me. It doesn’t sit well in her mouth when she tries to bring herself to say it. Doesn’t make sense.

Her phone buzzes, and for a second Lexa thinks it’s Skylark with an answer before she realizes that that’s not even the right phone. It’s the hospital, and she puts them on speaker. Smartphones are
great, but she misses the action of flipping the phone open and closed.

Tapping imaginary buttons doesn’t have the same sense of a decision made.

“Yes?”

“Um, this is Doctor Jackson,” says the voice at the other end of the line. “With the results of the test you wanted? Is this the, um, is this Lexa’s office?”

“This is Lexa.” She sits down at her desk. Time to be official, even if he can’t see her.

“Right. I have the results of the test you wanted, on the cream.” There’s the sound of typing, but it’s regular enough that he’s probably just tapping the keyboard.

Nervous: Good. Nervous people are more likely to tell the truth.

Also. Nervous: Bad. That means he doesn’t have good news.

“Go ahead.”

“Well, in more concentrated forms, the substance added to the cream is essentially a roofie. But as it was, it was very diluted, which means that it wouldn’t have had the expected— um, effects.”

“A roofie,” Lexa repeats. For some reason whenever she hears the term she imagines an unconscious woman on a slanted shingled roof. Usually the kind with a window poking out the top. It's weirdly specific, and often prevents her from treating roofies with the gravity they warrant.

“Not like this, though,” Jackson repeats. “Granted, it might be different if we had a larger sample, but assuming that it was evenly saturated, this amount would just make the drinker feel… ill.”

“Describe it.” Surely Sky Crew didn’t think they could roofie her in the middle of a Starbucks and then kidnap her? Lexa has an image of Skylark and Homer trying to drag her down the street in broad daylight before she wakes up and kills them both with her bare hands.

And they often knock out people with sleep darts. The idea that they’d stoop to a poorly concentrated drug doesn’t make any sense.

If Skylark was smart enough to control every bit of her body language in order to sell the lie, then surely she’d come up with a better plan.

“Well, it would take maybe an hour to kick in, but then the, um, drinker would feel nauseous and dizzy. There would be chances of vomiting and diarrhea based on what they’ve eaten that day. If we assume that the average person— say, a hundred sixty pounds— added one spoonful to their coffee, then it would probably clear up within four, five hours.’

So if she’d been poisoned, she wouldn’t have even been able to get out of yesterday’s duel— er, meeting— between Gosci and Memorial Park contractors.

“I see.”

Her phone dings and buzzes at the same time, causing it to move a little across the desk. Dr. Jackson clears his throat, but Lexa checks the text anyway: it’s from Aden. A picture of a test followed by a string of emojis.

She sends him back a thumbs up.
“Have there been many cases of this particular—” she refuses to say ‘roofie’— “drug lately?”

Another series of taps from his end, but this time it sounds like he’s actually typing words. “I can only see it if the patient chooses to do a urine or blood test, and most of them don’t. So when I say that I haven’t seen any more than usual, it doesn’t mean very much.”

If she asked, he’d find someone who could tell her, but that information probably won’t be helpful. Someone didn’t want to kill her. They weren’t even trying to kidnap her.

Someone could have been trying to assault— not Skylark, but the girl Skylark is the rest of the time. But in a coffee shop? In the morning?

No. Skylark’s secret identity doesn’t make sense as a target. It was someone who knew Lexa would be there. Someone who didn’t want her dead, or even incapacitated. Just paranoid. Distrustful of Sky Crew. Unlikely to make an alliance.

Lexa has been betrayed before. By her father, by doctors, and lines of faceless bureaucrats. She’s been betrayed and she’s stopped letting herself be surprised by it, so why does she feel like her organs are collapsing in on themselves, like she can’t breathe, why is there pressure behind her eyes like she’s going to start crying when she doesn’t cry?

“Thank you,” she says. “I’ll call again if I have any questions.”

“Have a nice—”

She hangs up before Jackson can finish the sentiment.

Lexa has been betrayed before, so it shouldn’t feel like she’s stepped out her window into freefall.

Any, Indra or Gustus.

And, oh God. She knows.

For a second, she lets herself think about giving up. If she can’t trust them, she can’t trust anyone. She’s done. She can take Aden and some cash and leave Polis. She really could fall off the tower, let everything go to hell without her, let neighborhood gangs fight for her territory until Grounder Inc loses their contract and everything goes to shit. Why shouldn’t she? She’s given all of herself to this city, and it all just got thrown back in her face.

Pull yourself together.

Five more seconds of self pity, then she straightens, rubbing her eyes even though they’re still dry.

She’s going to have to be careful. Accuse with witnesses, get a confession with witnesses. She might even let them see her feel a feeling, to know that she doesn’t like to have to question her own, remind them how much faith she has in them. And how much betrayals hurt her. Trust must be reciprocal, after all. And if one of her closest advisers mistrusts her judgment, she’s going to have a lot to prove.

To do anything less than control every moment will be at her peril.

Hers, and Aden’s.

Because all three of them know.

Play the game, Alexis. The voice in her head is her father’s. But she takes a deep breath, and allows
herself thirty seconds to rage.

So she goes back through all of her good memories. When they were there for each other, when they joked together, and she thinks, *traitor*. She remembers the bits of herself she’d shared, and she thinks, *how could you*. Forces years of working together to turn sour, building up a store of hatred because she’s going to need it.

Fifteen seconds left, and she starts writing out post-it notes.

*Traitor.Traitor. Fucking traitor.*

Five seconds left, and she sets the post-its on fire. Lets them burn out in a trash can under the window.

During a conclave, different colors of smoke rise above the Vatican to indicate whether a new Pope has been chosen or they’re going to have to vote again. More post-its and Lexa could do the same, let everyone in her city know how foul her mood is, and warn them to behave accordingly.

She is Polis. She could let her anger seep through the streets. Force everyone to share it. But she is their leader, and her job is to bear their pain instead of spreading her own.

The thirty seconds are up.

Lexa takes a deep breath, straightens the cuffs on her shirt, and takes out another brick of post-it notes.

*Play the game, Alexis.*

Chapter End Notes

I’m sorry this is so short. I figured I owed you guys something-- I’ve been traveling the last few weeks, so there hasn’t been much time. And then my thumb got infected and I couldn't type. But I'm working on it! So here's a baby chapter. Also, if any of you live in northern Croatia, hmu.
Promises to Keep

Chapter Summary

And Indra has always known men like him, so convinced that they’re right that they’ll do anything, so determined to protect that they endanger, insisting that what they’re doing is for the good of whatever woman they’re worried about at the time. It’s the worst kind of betrayal.

Chapter Notes

tw for character death. Also at one point another character suggests that someone should just go kill themselves.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Indra’s mother hadn’t had a god of her own, so she’d named her only daughter after the neighbor’s. She either hadn’t known or cared that Indra was a male deity— she’d just wanted her daughter to be strong.

And she is. Before she was a Strong Woman, Indra was a Strong Girl, doing what Strong Girls did: rejecting boys, winning fights, winning red cards and joining the army.

In the army, Indra did what Strong Women did: beat the boys at everything she could, and, if she had to, beat them up. As a drill sergeant, she’d been ruthless. Wore every muttered ‘bitch’ and ‘cunt’ like a badge of honor. The mutterers donned bruises as badges of shame.

Three tours, dozens of trainees, and she’d returned to find Polis exactly how she left it. She’d never entertained the notion that she could stop being Strong once she got home. The city had taken her brother, her friends, had left her father a cripple and her mother devastated. So when the daughter of a man Indra had sentenced to at least a thousand extra push-ups appeared, Pentagon wrapped around her finger and talking about peace through weapons manufacturing, Indra had laughed.

Jobs won’t bring peace, she had said. No one is going to want a job when they get what they want for free.

But as it turned out, the bosses were happy if they stayed the boss. Grounder Industries was willing to promote whoever Lexa told them to, and there was just enough consistency in the status quo to make the transition. It had left them all watching, wondering what this crazy white girl was going to do next.

And Indra?

She would keep playing the Strong Woman, The Black Warrior Ex-Military Sidekick. She will kill whoever it takes for peace, so that maybe, some day, some other little girls can stop being Strong. And it’s not hard, following Lexa. Indra has been a leader, she has been a follower, and now she is both. She gains authority by association, she gets to influence the Commander’s plans, she is
valued and she is needed and hey, Lexa has never called her a bitch. She’s respected Lexa since she stabbed a man through the hand, and liked her since their first shared beer. She’s even done the Commander the courtesy of pretending that she doesn’t remember her name.

But sometimes she wonders if Allen Heda would be proud of his daughter. It doesn’t matter, of course— he’d earned a thousand extra push-ups, but that hadn’t been enough to save him.

Indra, Anya and Gustus are all gathered in Lexa’s office now. Sitting in a row facing her.

It shouldn’t feel different than normal. They always sit like this. But between the way Lexa is looking at them, and the way she’s stacking and restacking some flow charts, Indra has a sudden need to freeze this last moment of calm. Because something is about to fall apart.

Then the urge passes. Something is always about to fall apart, and she has never done anything but face it straight on.

Lexa selects one of her charts and turns it to face them. It’s covered in post-it notes.

The post-it notes only come out when someone is about to die. Indra hopes it’s one of the Cliffs from Bluelake. They might be allies now, but as far as Indra is concerned, they can all suck a thousand dicks, not that she’ll ever say that aloud. She will be Strong, she can be Angry, but she will never be Sassy. She’ll never be the punchline.

But it’s not the Cliffs. “SKYLARK” is written in neat capitals at the top of the page.

“Someone tried to poison me yesterday,” Lexa says. She sounds almost bored. But then, she does like to put on a good show. “I was at coffee with Skylark. Obviously, I considered Skylark the main suspect.” Sure enough, the blue post-it at the beginning says motive: revenge (Spwlkr). But it’s followed by an arrow to a pink post it that says complied with directive at time, no sign of retaliation. Another says attempted kidnapping/bargaining/blackmail, but it leads to poor planning, no chance of successful execution. Other trails of blue meet similar pink ends.

Anya looks at Indra like Indra is supposed to have some answers. Indra shrugs. Gustus, meanwhile, looks at the paper like he wants to light it on fire.

“Tried to poison you how?” Anya asks.

Lexa explains, briefly, while presenting them with another flow-chart. This one is called ‘Roan,’ and only has one blue (Arkadia acquisition) before a series of pinks (would have to know who I was going to meet, if knew that would have better plan.) The Nia and City of Light ones end similarly.

She had told them about the City of Light hive mind theory yesterday. But there had been no mention of poison.

“So the only answer I could come up with is that it was someone who didn’t want to hurt me— for more than a few hours— but did want me to believe that it was any of these people. So. Someone who knew where I was going, and was able to get in touch with someone at the shop. Presumably someone who had already tried to warn me off the meeting.”

So it’s Indra or Gustus, because Anya had been in favor of working with Sky Crew. They look at each other. Because they both know who the traitor is, and something in Indra’s stomach hardens.

And Indra has always known men like him, so convinced that they’re right that they’ll do anything, so determined to protect that they endanger, insisting that what they’re doing is for the good of whatever woman they’re worried about at the time. It’s the worst kind of betrayal.
And because Gustus and Indra know, Lexa knows now as well. She can read it on their faces, in their posture— because now she’s turning to Gustus.

“Gustus,” she says, very quiet.

He looks at the floor.

“I was trying to protect you,” he says. Predictable, and the honest truth. “Tond Circle will never be okay with legitimizing Sky Crew, Azgeda Park will capitalize on that—”

Lexa raises a hand, and he goes silent.

And if Lexa asks, Indra will kill him. He can’t remain alive, not with what he knows and an enemy out there that can download memories. In another time, perhaps, he could be saved, but all they have is this time and this set of rules to work with. If Lexa asks, Indra will kill him, because the Commander already takes too many lives on her shoulders.

But she won’t ask.

Indra wouldn’t respect her if she did.

So she offers, by putting a hand to her thigh where she keeps one of her guns, looking directly at Lexa so that the meaning is clear. And just like Indra knew she would, Lexa shakes her head.

“Anya, Indra, can you two clear his house?”

Go through it, make sure there’s nothing anyone could find when someone eventually comes knocking. Maybe this is worse: Lexa will have to bear witness to his death, but the other two will have to bear witness to his life. And Indra wants to wait, wants a moment to question the man she had trusted five minutes ago: wants to ask him how, wants to ask him why, but she knows the answers.

He cares for Lexa. He believes in the Coalition. He believes that he is correct.

And he is from Tond Circle.

It will take more than a year for the scars Spacewalker left to go away.

So she just nods to Lexa, levels one look at Gustus—a reprimand, a goodbye, an acknowledgment of what they’ve been through and what he’s done—and then she walks towards the door.

She hasn’t said a word.

Anya falls into step behind her, with her familiar, uneven rhythm. Step step-crutch, step step-crutch.

Through the waiting area, with its couches and complete lack of magazines. Past the conference room. To the elevator, with its key that Gustus knows, punch in the passcode and the doors open.

“Gustus,” Anya says when the doors have closed. She has one fist clenched by her side, the other grabbing and releasing her crutch to the rhythm of her pulse. “Gustus.”

“Yeah,” Indra agrees. “Let that be a lesson, I guess.”

Anya snorts.
Down, down, down they go. Out the deserted lobby—when did it get so late? The sun has long set, the streetlights turning everything yellowish-green.

Gustus lives nearby. They all do. Ready to be at the office at a moment’s notice. Ready to protect. To protect.

He lives nearby, but Indra has never been to his house. She had no expectations of it, but it still manages to surprise her. It’s clean, for starters: and now that she thinks about it more, maybe she thought of Gustus as a man-cave sort of person. But it’s all used furniture, a couple fake plants—what—and a stack of books on the floor next to the sofa.

“Living room or bedroom?” Anya asks.

Indra glances at the door that’s waiting across from the bathroom. “Living.”

Anya nods once, and then pulls out a scanner and presses her ear to the wall. Indra turns to the books: a stack of John Grisham novels, and one book just called “FEATHERS.” There’s no code she can see when she flips through them, and she decides to give them the benefit of the doubt, at least for now.

There are two knives in the couch cushions and five hundred dollars cash in a hollow leg of the coffee table. It would be suspicious, except Indra has seven hundred dollars in a secret compartment in her ottoman. Some families make earthquake kits…

There’s a card from his aunt under a newspaper. It’s got the dogs playing poker on it, followed by a pun. Because even traitors have aunts, and Indra eyes the card for a minute. He’d never talked about an aunt, but then, he didn’t talk much about anything. She throws it into the Box of Suspicion, just to be safe.

“Nothing in the walls,” Anya reports after two sweeps of the room.

The next interesting find is tucked into his night stand, underneath some socks and empty melatonin bottles.

“Gustus kept a diary,” Anya says, and it’s the first part of the whole affair that she sounds surprised about. Indra doesn’t question her use of the past tense: there’s no use watching the time. Even if he isn’t dead yet, he’s going to be soon. It’s easier to assume that it’s already done.

“No he didn’t.”

“He did.” A book is shoved in Indra’s face. It’s black, with the words “one line a day!” embossed on the cover. Gustus clearly wasn’t religious about it: the page that’s supposed to have five years of January 3rds is empty, and some pages only have one or two entries in the five year span.

“This is against all rules,” Anya says, sitting down on the bed. “What was he thinking?”

Indra shakes her head, leafing through it. Diaries are dangerous, but this one is—almost disturbingly mundane. “The Polecats lost to Houston,” she reads, from April of last year. “I’m displeased.”

“Is that a code?”

Indra doesn’t think so. “He did talk about the Polecats a few times.” A few days later—“I bought a lottery ticket. I did not win. I do not know what I expected.” She flips to last night, but it’s blank.
She doesn’t know what she’d thought it would say. Maybe 'today I betrayed the Commander. She will kill me. I do not know what I expected.'

They put the diary in the Box of Suspicion anyway. Just in case.

Someone can either go through all the entries and determine if there’s anything dangerous there, or they can burn it and never have to wonder. The last few years of Gustus’s life, up in flames, just like the rest of him.

There is one gun hanging on the back of his night stand, and two knives in an alcove behind a photo of some fruit.

Indra is pretty sure she’s seen the same photo in a waiting room somewhere.

“Ooh, here’s something weird,” Anya says as they’re finishing the kitchen. She shakes a bottle of whiskey. “Keeps his top shelf stuff on the bottom shelf.” It’s about half empty, sloshing around in there. Indra raises her eyebrows, intending to convey disapproval, but the message is either lost or ignored. Anya opens one of the cabinets and grabs— two juice cups?

One has the Flash on it.

Anya’s hand trembles for a second as she uncorks the bottle and pours each cup. And it’s not that Indra doesn’t think she can hold her liquor, but Anya takes pain meds like breath mints, and Indra doesn’t want another colleague down.

But Strong Women don’t nag, so Indra trusts— and isn’t that a joke, Indra trusts— Anya not to get herself killed.

Gustus doesn’t have a kitchen table. Maybe he ate on the sofa. Maybe he never ate here.

They sit on the floor, Indra leaning up against a cabinet, Anya against the dishwasher.

“Think we should have called Archie?” Anya asks after a few moments. Indra frowns into her cup.

“But then who would get rid of the remains?”

Indra takes a gulp of whiskey. It burns going down, but no more than the rest of the night had. “I don’t know how she’s going to play it. Do they find a body and open a murder investigation? Do we frame someone? Do we tell everyone he was a traitor?” Every option could make them look strong. Every option could destroy them.

“He should kill himself,” Anya spits. “Save us all a lot of risk.”

Sometimes Indra thinks Anya is her long-lost Tibetan soul sister. If asked, she would translate this sentiment to we agree on many things. But they’re both warriors, born in a time that wants soldiers instead. With souls that feel ancient, even if Anya is trapped in a body broken by the bullet that still lives in her side.

They were meant for glorious battle. To be one of the 300, or laying siege to Troy. Instead they got a booby-trapped desert and a city breaking at the seams. Instead they’re sitting on a floor drinking a dead man’s booze.
But then, battles are only glorious to the poets after the fact.

“I never thought Gustus,” Indra says, because she doesn’t allow herself to angst but it’s okay to ponder. “I never.”

Anya makes a hacking, snorting sound. “I’m not going to dwell.”

“No?”

“I’m going to drink.”

“Cheers.” Indra holds out her cup, for Anya to clink with her Flash-adorned one.

“I taught her how to knife fight,” Anya says, still talking for all her talk of drinking. “She was ten, maybe, had gotten a switchblade from somewhere. Kid was skittish as fuck. Pulled it on me once when I surprised her, had no idea what she was doing.”

“You did good.” Certainly made enough of an impression for Lexa to seek her out, eight years later. Set them all off on this wild road they’re on.

“Makes me feel old.”

“Please.” Indra has a handful of years on the other woman. “You’re thirty-three. You don’t get to be nostalgic yet.”

“I dropped my life, and now I’m loyal to a lesbian almost a decade younger than me. I’m allowed to reflect.”

Yeah, that’s reasonable.

They keep drinking.

They are not stopping, nor is there any sign of snow, but Lexa has Robert Frost stuck in her head anyway as she and Gustus make their way through Delphi Park.

_The woods are lovely, dark and deep. The woods are lovely, dark and deep. The woods—_

The park probably don’t deserve to be called woods. It’s a few miles of paved trails, surrounding a man-made lake where Fir Ridge meets Bluelake. But it has what she needs— shelter, water, and, at this time of night, privacy.

_Lovely, dark and deep._

“Lexa,” Gustus says, as they near the lake. It’s his first attempt at speaking since she told him to shut up an hour ago. She’d loaded him into the car at knifepoint, driven him halfway to Delphi, then left the car still downtown and walked. Well. She’d walked. He’d been walked. Because she’s not in a hurry, and she’s trying to think, there’s so many things she’s tried and failed to say, words coming to mind but never reaching her tongue.
“Lexa,” he says again, and she doesn’t stop him. But then he hesitates again. “Are you going to kill me?”

“Do I have any other choice?” he knows what’s at stake just as well as she does.

“You could send me to a remote house in Arkansas?”

She doesn’t know if that’s supposed to be an attempt at humor. Gustus hates Arkansas. Gustus hates Arkansas and wants to visit New Orleans again, his drink of choice is Fireball and he still watches *Days of Our Lives* when he’s bored and it’s on, mostly to wonder how it hasn’t ended yet. She hates that she knows these, these little things about him, hates how she’s going to think of him every time she sees that stupid red dragon logo or Josh Taylor’s face on TV.

“They could find you. It’s not hard to find people, anywhere. You know I can’t.”

“It’s okay.” Their feet crunch down the gravel trail. The park is supposed to feel like it’s away from city life, but there are still car motors in the distance, the occasional flicker of headlights. “I was always prepared to die for you.”

Lexa jams the knife a little harder at his side. “You’re not dying for me,” she says, and it comes out as a hiss. “You’re not dying *for* anything, don’t you get it? You tried to manipulate me into killing Skylark, into losing whatever help her Crew can offer us.”

“She’ll destroy you.” He says it like it’s obvious—*it’s going to rain tomorrow, you’re not strong enough to stay a step ahead of Sky Crew.* It’s infuriating. Because Lexa has been nothing but strong, and she’s not going to be taken down by a group of JDs.

“I may not have her particular powers, but don’t think I can’t take her down if I have to.”

“It might not be intentional. The other neighborhoods, they could turn on you—”

“The only one who has turned on me is you,” she says, and he stops talking. “You lost your right to question my decisions when you tried to drug my coffee.” They’ve reached the edge of the lake now, and she’s running out of time. It’s eerie, at night, with the empty picnic tables and occasional plastic bag caught on the rock beach. So she turns them towards the dock. It’s lined with cinder blocks, used for mooring rowboats and the kayaks people can rent on the other side, but they’ll do.

Gustus doesn’t insult her by apologizing for what he did, and she doesn’t insult him by apologizing for what she’s going to do.

He knows about Aden.

He can’t be trusted.

He had to know that she wasn’t going to have any other option.

They step out onto the dock. Twenty feet, ten feet, and then they’re at the edge. Lit only by the distant fuzz of street lamps, Gustus is just a silhouette.

It doesn’t make it easier. The hatred she’d worked up earlier had started ebbing the moment she saw him. It’s hard work to keep it up.

“Please,” he says, and for a second she thinks he’s going to beg for his life. She doesn’t think she can stomach that. But he doesn’t. “Please, just remember. Stay strong.”
“Is there anyone you want me to contact?”

His head shake is just barely discernible in the darkness. So she reaches for her weapons. Knife or gun, knife or gun.

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep. But I have promises to keep.*

They’re so contrary, the two weapons. Everyone thinks that a knife is a more personal way to kill someone. You have to be up close, you have to push it into flesh. Feel it give way. Let the blood drip onto your hands. With guns, the action and the result are separate. Pull the trigger, and someone dies several feet away. But after death, they’re reversed: guns and their bullets are forever linked, in a way that a knife and cut are not. A gun cannot be unfired. But a knife can be washed, shining and clean, in a way that the one who held it will never be.

She should steal a boat, go out into the middle of the lake. But it’s deep here, and the water is murky. He will be found, but enough time will pass, first. There aren’t many people swimming this time of year.

Lexa pulls out the knife.

“I’ll miss you,” she admits. For what that’s worth.

Gustus nods shortly. His breath has sped up, and he’s always been willing to die but now that it’s facing him, he’s terrified. Her chest aches.

“Stay strong,” he says again, but she doesn’t know if he’s talking to her or himself.

In the distance, a car honks. A few drops of rain hit the dock. In one swift motion, Lexa cuts her friend’s throat.

Blood splatters her arm.

He falls backwards, and the splash feels louder than a gunshot could have been.

The body bobs there, useless. But he’s not going to float away, so Lexa leaves him as she brings over one of the cinderblocks and a bit of mooring cable. And then she hauls him— it— back in until he’s parallel to the dock so that she can tie the rope around his middle. The other end goes through the block. A foot and a half of slack is more than she wanted, but the air has left his lungs anyway. He’ll settle on the bottom.

She shoves the block into the water, and Gustus’s body is jerked down, pulling bits of flotsam with him like a sinking ship.

And then he’s gone.

There’s no point in staring at the spot he disappeared: it’s all a matte blackness, and Gustus isn’t there anymore, anyway.

She turns back to the trails and begins to walk.

*They’re so contrary, the two weapons. Everyone thinks that a knife is a more personal way to kill someone. You have to be up close, you have to push it into flesh. Feel it give way. Let the blood drip onto your hands. With guns, the action and the result are separate. Pull the trigger, and someone dies several feet away. But after death, they’re reversed: guns and their bullets are forever linked, in a way that a knife and cut are not. A gun cannot be unfired. But a knife can be washed, shining and clean, in a way that the one who held it will never be.*

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep. But I have promises to keep.*

*— but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep*

—

And she’d give anything for more miles because the walk back feels so much shorter, the words she hadn’t found before coming to her. *Gustus, my blood is black. Gustus, Do you think I’m stupid,*
Gustus, do you think Skylark is stupid? I never told you how, Gustus, thank you for being here as long as you were, Gustus—

Miles to go before I sleep—

The woods are lovely, dark and deep—

Lexa grits her teeth and walks faster.

The rain really picks up around the trailhead, and so she’s soaked by the time she gets to her car. Getting a towel out of the trunk to put on the seat will likely be useless, so Lexa resigns herself to the smell of wet car.

She turns the heat up as high as it will go.

Beyoncé’s *Run the World* is on the radio, and she wants to laugh, because she’s having trouble running just one city. Beyoncé would probably be doing a better job than Lexa is right now.

Then again, holding oneself to Beyoncé’s standard is only a recipe for failure and low self esteem. At least it’s more uplifting than Robert Frost, even though Lexa doesn’t think she should be uplifted right now.

Once at home, she takes the elevator from the underground parking garage. Every surface in it is mirrored, so she has nowhere to look but at infinite Lexas. Soggy, tired, and not the picture of authority that she tries at all times to project. But Aden won’t mind, and half of Titus’s job is to not say anything to anyone, so it’s not too concerning.

There’s a spot of Gustus’s blood on her wrist. Shit. She tries to rub it off with her thumb, smearing it more across her skin. *Out, damn spot,* and she tries not to laugh because the elevator is dinging and she’s facing her front door.

Aden knew Gustus. What the hell is she going to tell Aden?

The truth. She’s always going to tell him the truth, because comforting lies will only put him in danger.

She goes in.

Aden is sprawled across the couch, watching a TV show that she is pretty sure she banned him from watching last week. The butler-cum-bodyguard is nowhere to be seen.

“Where’s Titus?” Lexa asks, and Aden looks up like he’s just noticed her. He shouldn’t be so easily distracted: he’ll need all his senses alert.

“He left,” the boy says, scrunching up his face. He was happy to see her, and now he’s a little annoyed. “He leaves at eleven.”

Shit, it’s way past eleven.
“Shouldn’t you be in bed?”

Aden shrugs. “I was worried,” he mumbled. “You said you’d be home.”

Yeah.

She had, hadn’t she.

Before she realized she’d have to take a detour to Delphi.

Lexa nods a few times, and then goes to grab a towel. She’s got to figure out what she’s going to say. *I killed Gustus? Gustus is dead? Gustus was killed? Gustus betrayed us, I’m so sorry, sometimes people do that?* She hasn’t decided when she gets back to the living room. When she spreads the towel out over the couch and sits down.

“Are you okay?” Aden asks. He pauses the TV, and the name of the show comes up on the DVR. And yes, he had been expressly forbidden from watching that: his life might be gory enough.

He’s mad at her for being late, he understands that sometimes she has to be late, and he’s still worried about her. If she weren’t afraid of giving him pneumonia, she’d give him a hug.

“Tough day,” she says.

She’ll tell him about Gustus later. He might not even ask. They hadn’t met that many times.

“You want to talk about it?”


Aden’s eyes brighten, and he sits up from his sofa-slouch. “They’re so cool,” he says, starting to rub his hands on his knees. “Nora’s brother Bryan got saved by Turret a couple weeks ago, and Nora says that Bryan says that Turret is really, really cool. They have actual superpowers.”

“You have actual superpowers,” Lexa points out.

“Yeah but not like *that.* Everyone at school thinks they’re great. One time Audrey and Nicole got into a huge fight over which one was the best. I thought it was dumb, though, because we don’t know what all of them can do, so there’s no way to tell who is the best yet.”

Lexa smiles despite herself. “Which ones were their favorites?”

“Shadow and Snap. They were both wrong though. Turret’s the coolest. He saved Bryan.”

“You said.” She reaches out and ruffles Aden’s blonde head. He makes another face at her, but it’s much more friendly than the last one. They’re all wrong, of course: Skylark is definitely the best, but Lexa has yet to stoop to arguing with fifth graders. “I have to make a phone call really fast. But if you get into your pajamas, we can watch something— something *else*— after. Then you gotta go to sleep.”

“It’s Friday,” he whines.

“Or you can go to bed right now.”

“Fiiiine.”

“And change the channel.”
“But Lexa—”

“That man is getting crucified,” she says, pointing to where he had paused. “Is he not?”

“Yes, but—”

“Change the channel.”

She slit a man’s throat an hour ago. She’ll have to tell Aden that later. Silly to argue over the TV, but it all has to be real to him. He can’t get used to blood, he can’t form an emotional distance, because when it’s real, it’s always fucking real.

Lexa closes the door to her room and takes a moment to consider faceplanting on her bed, but she’s still wet. She should change first. But she’s gotta make this call now, or she’s going to back out.

She sits down in the middle of her floor, the towel under her like a picnic blanket. Pulls out the old flip phone, and dials.

Connor has been out of town for a week and he comes back to an utter shitshow, about which no one seems to know the full story.

“You said it was fine!” he complains when he lets himself into Miller’s apartment, half past nine at night. Jasper and Harper are already there, sprawled out across the beige carpet. Jasper is trying to light a lighter, and failing.

“Connor, my man!” Jasper pushes himself upright with what looks like a vast amount of effort. “Just my man I was hoping to see.” He holds out a blunt. “Help.”

“You said it was fine,” Connor repeats, directing his glare at Miller even as he flicks his thumb against his index finger, starting a small flame on his fingertip. He holds it out so that Jasper can light up. “So I left for a week. And I come back to all this nonsense.”

Miller raises his hands. He’s the only one sitting on any actual furniture, although to be fair, he only possesses the one chair. The only things on his walls are photos, tacked up seemingly at random: Jasper and Monty pull faces from above the toaster, Octavia, Bellamy and Clarke pose awkwardly on the wall above the couch—a six by four inch photo just a little left of the center. Connor, Harper and Monroe are wearing dumb hats near a light switch. That picture is a square—Murphy had been cut out of it.

Also, he never changes his light bulbs until the last minute. The one in the living room lamp is flickering, giving the room the aura of firelight.

There’s a reason that Miller’s apartment isn’t the normal gathering place, and Connor is a little bit weirded out that this has changed, too.

“It’s not our nonsense,” Harper says, rolling onto her back to accept the blunt from Jasper. That’s a great way to get ash falling in your mouth, but Connor isn’t going to judge.

He helps himself to a patch of rug. “How is it not our nonsense?”
“Raven, Monty, Clarke and Bellamy are working on something seeecret.” Jasper draws out the word. “They think we don’t know.”

“Oh.” That explains a lot. Jasper becomes worse and worse company the farther he is from Monty. Their bromance is endearing and irritating and Connor is not at all jealous that he doesn’t have anyone like that. It’d be annoying. Jasper is annoying. And high.

It only ever takes one drag to get Jasper high. He’s a great smoking buddy.

“Do we know what they’re working on?”

“Nope.” Ash then falls onto Harper’s face, and she sits up, shaking her head like an irritated dog. “But they’re acting all super secret and guilty. And Octavia is sneaking out to hook up with her new Coalition boyfriend, so—”

“What.”

“But enough about us.” Harper offers him the blunt, which he takes, because hey, free weed. “You just got back from visiting your parents.”

“…Yes?” He has a sense of where this is going, but looks at Miller anyway, searching for an ally. Miller is typing away on his phone, and doesn’t answer his call for assistance.

“Your dad, specifically.”

“Yes.”

By now Jasper has picked up on the conversation thread, and although he doesn’t sit up, he does sort of flop around so that he’s facing Connor. Connor has the vague urge to set him on fire, but he’s gotten good at squashing that particular instinct down.

“Your wonderful, wonderful dad.”

“And since we just shared our hard earned pot—”

“—It’s only fair if you share your spoils.” Harper offers up her most endearing smile. It’s only slightly endearing.

Connor’s father makes amazing cookies.

And Connor regrets ever sharing that information. Or at least, he’ll pretend to regret it, hide how nice it is to be able to have extra food to share. He gives Harper the joint back and gets to his feet. “Fine,” he says, because that’s always what he was going to say— hell, that’s what his parents expected. “Remember to share these with your friends,” his mama had told him, because his mama takes the parentless status of the rest of the Crew very seriously. She would send them all personalized birthday cakes, if Connor ever told her their birthdays. Or their names. It’s safer not to know, he’d told them, and they’d agreed and told everyone he had gone back to jail.

(It hurts, sometimes, to think of how disappointed they all must be in him. Neighbors, school friends.)

(His grandpa.)

“Pleeeeeease?” Harper asks.

“Pretty please?” Jasper adds.
“Please please pretty please?”

“What are you two badgering Connor for?” Miller asks, finally finishing his text.

“He just got back from DC,” Harper says. Connor wonders who he’s been texting that’s so important. “You know what he always brings back from DC.”

“Fine.” Connor gets back to his feet, laying his fake annoyance on thick. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Three cheers go up behind him as he makes his way back into the hall. He’s just closed Miller’s door when Clarke comes out of Raven’s room, and Connor’s irritation turns a shade more real.

“Connor, hey,” she says. “How was your trip?”

“It was good.” The hallway is far narrower than code, and so they both turn sideways to get past each other. It makes it hard to ignore the way Clarke is staring at his face, like she’s looking for something. If that something is zits, she’s SOL, because Connor’s skin is especially great today. “But it sounds like you needed people here. Why didn’t you call me?”

Clarke waves a hand. “I didn’t want to ruin your visit” she says, having to raise her voice a little over the whine of the 3D printer that starts up in Raven’s apartment. “We were fine. And if we weren’t fine, it was good to have someone out of blast radius who could come save us.”

“I couldn’t have come and saved y’all because I wouldn’t have known y’all were missing for days,” Connor says, even though he is pretty sure Clarke had never considered his one-man rescue as a possibility. Clarke doesn’t ever plan for herself having to be rescued.

“Well, we were fine. How are your parents?”

“They sent us cookies. We’re gonna eat them, you want in?” It could be a peace offering, maybe. Remind her that they’re here and can know what’s happening. Also, Clarke looks exhausted. Connor’s feelings about her secrets aside, she could probably use a cookie.

She hesitates. “Connor, in DC did you—”

*I’m WAKING UP, to ASH AND DUST—*

Clarke digs her phone out of her pocket. The screen is tilted away from him, but the caller isn’t someone in her contacts—the only numbers he catches at the end are six and nine. He could tell Jasper that, he’d have a laugh for ages. Then again, at a certain point, Jasper thinks everything is funny.

“Sorry,” she mutters to him, then scampers off down the hall.

No cookies for Clarke then. Connor shrugs, and continues on his way.

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Skylark picks up on the fourth ring. Not that she’s counting.

“Hey.”
Lexa takes a deep breath. “I figured out who did it.”

A pause, and Lexa stares at her wall. She really needs some art or something at floor-sitting level. Make it more interesting.

“That’s good,” Skylark says. “That’s, um, very good timing.”

What. “Where are you?” Lexa asks, suddenly suspicious.

“In my room.”

Wrong question, then. “Where are you going?”

“Well, I was about to go, um, follow the barista home, but you’ve just saved me that trip. So, thanks.”

Yes, that would have been awkward. Funnier, perhaps, if she’d caught Skylark on the poor woman’s roof or with her already tied to a chair or something. But bad for public image.

“You’re welcome,” Lexa says, as dry as she can manage. Then— “It was Gustus.”

Another burst of silence from the other end. “What?”

“It was Gustus. He wanted me to think that you had done it.” Definitely needs some art. Maybe a nice landscape.

“Does he think I’m stupid?” Skylark demands, offended. “The hell did I do to him?”

“He’s from Tond Circle.”

The exhale sounds like static on the phone, and Lexa imagines Skylark deflating. Sinking back to earth. Maybe she is.

“Oh.” She sounds very small.

“He was convinced that either you were going to kill me, or that Tond Circle would be so enraged at any collaboration that they’d kill me. He was convinced he was protecting me.” It sounds weird when she says it out loud; it also doesn’t sound implausible. So she’s not expecting to Skylark to start laughing.

It’s the somewhat deranged, hysterical laughing of someone who has found something that isn’t anything resembling funny.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “It’s just— F— Spacewalk— Finn, fuck it, his name was Finn,” and Skylark sucks in the breath she had just let out. Lexa thinks, Finn, matching the name to the floppy-haired boy— man— who had left such carnage in his wake. “He thought he was killing all those people for me.” And Lexa isn’t as good at reading voices as she is bodies, but she can pick up the disgust in Skylark’s voice. The self-doubt. “And so I helped you guys kill him. But because of what he did, Gustus thought that he had to kill us for you, so you—” and then she stops. “Did you—?”

“I killed him,” Lexa admits. It doesn’t feel as liberating to say out loud as she thought it would. It’s not a relief of the burden— she’s already twisted her own memories of Gustus, and it’s on its way of becoming just a statement of fact. “With the City of Light out there, it was too much of a risk not to.” She’s worried, suddenly, that Skylark will think her a monster.

She doesn’t know why it matters.
“It’s okay,” Skylark says quietly. Then—“People who would do anything for you can be worse than enemies.”

And that’s the line they’ll always have to walk, as leaders. Something that nobody else is going to understand. Lexa wishes she and Skylark were face to face. “Did you love him?” she asks, not sure if she wants the answer. Could Skylark love someone who could do that?

“Finn? I—” silence. Lexa’s about to take the question back, before she starts speaking again. “It was complicated. I wasn’t in love with him. I thought I could be, before—it was complicated.”

She thought she could love him. And she still led him to his death.

Lexa hadn’t taken care of Spacewalker personally. Tond Circle had wanted to avenge their own, and Lexa had agreed. There had been other things going on. And Sky Crew hadn’t left Arkadia much, after that.

She should stand up. She’s still sitting on her floor like an idiot. She’d promised Aden.

“Oh,” Skylark says, with a forced cheer. “I think I might have some good news for you, soon. Not gonna say now, but I should know by Wednesday, if you’ll have time to meet.”

At this point, Lexa would kill someone else for some good news. She puts the phone on speaker so that she can go through her calendar. “I can do Wednesday evening?” she offers.

“I have work. Thursday evening?”

She doesn’t ask what Skylark does that gives her such irregular hours. “Can’t. Afternoon?”

A pause. “Sure. Let me just—yeah. Where?” the fact that they shouldn’t go back to the coffee shop goes unspoken.

“I have to be in Bluelake in the morning,” Lexa says, taking the phone off speaker and cramming it back against her ear. “But they’re having a music festival Thursday to Sunday. Lots of people our age, loud music, low chance of being overheard.”

“Higher chance of being in the background of selfies. We’ll have to go undercover. Can you pull off ‘hipster’?”

Lexa is sure that she’s being teased. What a weird conversation this has been. “I’ll have my people do some research, figure out what the kids are wearing these days.” Actually, she’s pretty sure that Allison from IT runs a fashion blog in her spare time. Although if Lexa showed up and asked her how to be hipster, the poor woman might have a heart attack.

She gets a bit of a laugh. More genuine than the last one. “Once you decide what you’re wearing, let me know, and tell me the meet-up spot.”

“Okay.” Lexa’s towel is almost soaked through: she should just take her wet clothes off, but she’ll wait until the conversation is over to do that. But she should wrap it up. Aden’s waiting. And she’s getting cold. “Goodnight, Skylark.”


“Clarke,” Lexa says, trying it out. It fits, she thinks: quick and strong and to the point. Clarke. “Goodnight, Clarke.”
“Night, Lexa.”

They both hesitate for a second, and then Lexa takes one for the team and hangs up.

“Clarke.” She says it aloud again, just to get a feel for it. “Clarke.”

Chapter End Notes

Whee. So I get like ten minutes of internet a day. On the up side, that means that I focus way more on writing. On the down side, that means posting is going to be harder. (If anyone's in Northern Italy, hmu :P)
Cold-Calling Kings

Chapter Summary

It’s not like Abby has anyone to come home to, anymore.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

People are always bitching about doctors being late. Which Abby thinks is fucking hilarious. Patients show up late, they pitch a fit, they let their kids run screaming down the hall because they’re scared of the MRI and what are they supposed to do, shrug and say they’ll scan them some other time? No, they have to calm them down and answer a million questions and it’s not like they can stop a surgery in the middle like, “sorry, you can only be here ‘till four, we’ll just put your body parts back together this weekend.”

People know doctors tend to be late. People expect and plan around doctors being late. It’s the doctor who ends up working overtime and making shit-all for it, who come home at eight pm when they technically get off work at six-thirty.

Not that it matters.

It’s not like Abby has anyone to come home to, anymore.

Sometimes she thinks that it would be nice to have a dog, but she’s not home enough to have a dog. Maybe a cat. Cats just sort of do their own thing, right? Abby eyes the series of picture frames and her mom’s vase that’s sitting on a shelf. She’s read Garfield, she knows they can be destructive fuckers. Maybe no cat.

It’s late, is the point.

She drops her bag down on the couch, and into the kitchen where the answering machine (home phone, why does she still have a home phone,) is blinking. Three messages.

Number one: Telemarketer. To delete, press seven.

Number two: Who is she supporting in the local elections? To delete, press seven.

Number three: silence. To delete, press—

“Hi, Mom!” Abby freezes, halfway to the delete button. She hasn’t heard her daughter’s voice in years, but no one would know from the way Clarke was talking. “Just calling to say ‘hi’. Also, I had a brain question that I thought you might be able to help with. So, call me back when you get a chance! Bye!”

She plays it again.

Then she plays it again.

The last time she’d seen Clarke, she hadn’t known it would be the last time. Visits were rare: they
had Clarke in a facility a full day’s drive away. But she’d gone down every month as best she could, listened to Clarke talk about the food and the other inmates (kids)— “I just want to shut down Blake, he is not the powerhouse of this cell,” “Finn gave me some colored pencils that someone sent him, which was really nice of him,” “His name is Atom with a T, who fucking names their kid Atom? He belongs in some white-ass prep school or something.”

Clarke was the most white-ass kid Abby could think of, but she hadn’t pointed that out.

But she’d remembered that conversation. So when she’d been notified that Clarke had gotten into a fight (a fight? Clarke?) and had visiting privileges revoked, when her phone calls became tense and guarded (“Fine, it’s all good, food sucks.”) she’d been concerned.

When the news broke about Cage Wallace, and she’d seen a boy named Atom on the list of the dead, Abby had almost lost it.

Of course, Clarke was eighteen at that point. Legally, Abby wasn’t entitled to know anything without Clarke’s permission. Clarke hadn’t given it.

A few weeks later, she’d gotten a letter. “It’s like a bad CW drama here, but I’m hanging in there. Love you.”

A bad CW drama. Cage Wallace.

Clarke probably thought she was being funny.

And how dare she, honestly, how dare she not contact her mother for fucking years, how dare she let Abby think the worst, let Abby pick up her own pieces and get on with her life and then suddenly dance back into it like she’s still in kiddie ballet, leaving a cheerful message on the answering machine like they talk every week. Abby has spent years working her way back, and now in fifteen seconds, Clarke has—

Clarke has—

Abby hits redial.

Riiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing. Riiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing. Riiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing. Then an automated voice asks her to leave a message.

Of course. Of course it does.

She doesn’t leave a message. Just hangs up and stares at the phone for another minute before—

It starts ringing.

She answers.

“Mom?” Clarke asks, and she’s real, fuck, she’s real and alive and doesn’t have that dead ‘there’s someone listening over my shoulder’ tone she had the last time they’d spoken. “Sorry about that, that other line wasn’t secure.”

“Clarke.” Abby can’t manage anything else. “Clarke.”

“Hi.”

Hi?

You come back after years—
“Hi,” Abby says. “Are you okay?” because if she’s calling now then maybe she’s not okay, and
Abby glares at her stove like it’s responsible. She should sit down. She should breathe. She should
make sure she isn’t having a heart attack.

“I need help,” Clarke blurts. “I’m— we’re— in trouble, I really do have a brain question.”

“The kind I can’t tell you about unless you’re here. In Polis.”

Fine. This is fine. “I can get there tomorrow,” Abby says. “If I fly—”

“Don’t fly. Drive. And— pay for gas in cash.”

“Clarke, what is happening?” Because she can do this, but it’s a fifteen hour drive, and plane
tickets to Polis are only a hundred bucks. She’d flown into the Polis airport sometimes, then rented
a car to drive out to Mount Weather.

And if it’s that urgent—

“The more I tell you the more danger I’m in,” Clarke says. “I know that sounds fake, but— it’s
true. Which is kind of this whole situation, to be honest.”

Fine. Fine. Whatever. Clarke can burst into her life and have ridiculous requirements— Abby
knows, okay, she’s heard rumors of people with weird powers in Polis. No post online stays online
more than a few hours, but it’s enough—a blonde woman in her early to mid twenties who calls
herself Skylark. A missing daughter who loved the clouds.

I love you, Abby thinks.

“Check into a hotel under a different name,” Clarke continues. “The ones in Arkadia don’t care.
There’s one in Bluelake that won’t also, but Bluelake isn’t too safe right now. Actually— go to the
Ark Motel. Text me when you’re close and I’ll— shit! Don’t bring your phone. I’ll get you a new
one. When can you leave?” She’s terrified, Abby realizes. “Wait, you said you could go tomorrow,
right, tomorrow’s Sunday, long drive, meet at the motel at eight pm Monday? I’m sorry. I’m sorry.
I’ll be able to explain then, I promise.”

“Okay,” Abby says, because Clarke is her daughter and Abby would get into her car now, drive
for hours without sleeping, just to see a picture. A glimpse through the window. Seeing her,
speaking to her, meeting the woman she’s become—

She’d do anything.

She’s so angry she can hardly breathe.

“I’m sorr—” Clarke stops. “I’ll see you soon?”

Is she apologizing for calling now or not calling before?

“Eight o’clock, Monday,” Abby agrees. She wants to say ‘I love you,’ but while she’s considering
it, Clarke says “yep” and hangs up.

In a minute, Abby will get an overnight bag. She’ll pack— how long is she staying? Jesus Christ.
She’ll pack some clothes and a book and hope someone can cover her appointments. She can’t just
up and leave, except, of course she can. She has vacation days. She has to operate on Friday, but
there are always backups for that because you can’t just go in with a cold, so someone will cover, and it’ll be okay. It’ll be okay. She has a family emergency.

She has a family emergency.

She has a family.

Potentially Stupid Things Clarke has Done In The Last Day:

1) Told Lexa her name.

2) Asked her mother to come to Polis.

The first had been an impulse. Lexa trusted her with— with something, with a piece of herself, and maybe it was all an act to win Clarke’s trust but if it was, it worked. The Commander already knew where Clarke lived, knew where she came from, what harm could it do?

A lot. Is the answer. Especially with the City of Light out there. But that’s nothing, really, compared to number two. Calling her mother here, the land of the fracturing truce and sketchy Coalition and mind control and Clarke and Clarke’s life, hanging in the balance Loony Toons style, only staying up because she hasn’t looked down.

She’s brought another person that can be used against her into the fold, and she’s put her in danger, and she’s—

She’s missed her.

Not the way she misses her dad, stabbing and painful and I should have done better. It’s a hollow sort of awareness, just waiting to flare up when she sees something Abby would like, or hears a song that they had listened to in the car on the way to school, or kiddie soccer, or chess club tournaments because Clarke had been the kind of loser that entered U16 chess tournaments.

And won.

So she should know better than to bring her king to the middle of the board with no protection and no knowledge of what’s at stake. Because if she loses her mother, it’s all over. Clarke has lived without her for years, but she isn’t sure how she could approach a world where Abby is dead. A world where there’s no one who will let her in, should it all fall apart.

But Octavia and Bellamy’s mother is dead. Their respective fathers are either dead or missing. Raven’s mother is dead. Harper’s parents are dead, Monroe’s parents are AWOL, Monty’s mom is — alive somewhere, doing soy farming, or something. The point is, the point is, she isn’t sure what the point is except that they’ve all survived it. And it’s not like she’s called Abby to her death.

She’ll protect her.

Earlier today, after her shift, she had gone through the patients ward to find a man who felt no pain. “Devin?” she’d asked, walking closer, closer, waiting.
“Sorry,” the man had said, perfectly cheerful despite his looming surgeries. “I’m Jonathan.”

“Oh, must have the wrong room.” Which is when Clarke had felt the vibration.

The relief had far outweighed the itching.

Raven and Monty’s sensor worked.

A little slowly, and they’re working on it, but well enough that they can scan individuals. Clarke has made the rounds, finding an excuse to speak to everyone one-on-one. And they’re all clean. So there’s no reason to keep stalling.

They’ll be meeting her in the command room in just a few minutes. So she can tell them all the shit that she’s been bottling up, that she had spilled all over Lexa—

Lexa just killed one of her most trusted— friends? Were they friends? It seemed like she and Gustus were friends— and Clarke has to make that worth it.

For what Finn and Gustus thought they were trying to do.

Get your shit together, Griffin.

Lexa would be better at having this meeting than she is. Lexa probably wouldn’t even feel bad about announcing that she’d been lying to them for ages in the name of public safety— that’s Lexa’s job. But it’s not Clarke’s. And Jasper is going to be hurt that Monty knew, and he will express that hurt by lashing out at Clarke. Octavia is going to be hurt that Bellamy knew, and she will express that by lashing out at Bellamy. Miller, Harper and Monroe she thinks she can count on to be reasonable about it, and Connor is probably going to do that thing where he looks into an imaginary camera and sighs.

It’ll be fun. It’ll be a fun meeting. She should have made or bought cookies, but she doesn’t have time to do either of those things. Instead she paces a few times around her apartment and then does a few push-ups at four-times her normal gravity, just to see if she can. (She can.) (She wonders how many push-ups Lexa can do. Probably a lot. Lexa’s arms are like, #goals.)

(Jesus. She needs to stop talking to Monty so much.)

(Also, Clarke’s arms are pretty buff if she does say so herself. Which she does.)

(Jesus.)

She needs to get out of her apartment and go to— an almost identical apartment, but filled with more weapons. Yep. And maybe if she gets there before everyone else, she’ll have an idea of what to say. How to tell them. Because if they don’t have trust they don’t have anything but she’s only just learned that she can trust them and it hasn’t entirely sunk in.

And of course, when she gets to three-twelve, Monty and Harper are already there. They’ve claimed the couch and a bottle of mountain dew, and they’re passing the bottle back and forth and giggling like it’s actually getting them drunk. Clarke stares at them. She’d meant to incite a desire to share, but instead they seem to take it as a condemnation, and put the bottle away.

It’s just as well, really. The others must have heard her leave her room, because they come in— Jasper and Monroe to Monty and Harper’s sides of the couch, respectively, perching on the arms like gargoyle chaperones. Miller, Connor and Bellamy make it in a few seconds later, on the tail end of a joke. But Bellamy’s worried. He catches Clarke’s eye and then takes the computer chair
next to her, leaving the other two to fend for themselves.

Bellamy might not have liked keeping secrets, but he’s still going to take the fall with her, and she appreciates it more than she can put into words.

Raven is last. She has a bag of popcorn in one hand, and—another bag of popcorn in her other hand. She’s holding the first up to her mouth and eating it frog-style.

*Glad to have your support too, Rae,* Clarke thinks.

“I officially bring this meeting to order,” Jasper says, despite the fact that he clearly has no authority to do so nor knowledge about the agenda. “Clarke is going to tell us what she’s been so secretive about.”

Okay, maybe he does.

(Which bit does he want, though? The part where she met Lexa for coffee? The part where she told Lexa her name?)

“Right.” Clarke clears her throat. “I’m sorry about the, um, secrets. We just had to be careful—we knew that the City of Light could control people to some extent. But it’s more than that. It can control peoples’ thoughts, and access all their memories. So what one of them knows, they all can know.”

“That sounds like shitty sci fi,” says Miller, who literally has x-ray/infrared vision given to him in an illegal human experiment. “Where did you hear that?” He’s manspreading over on one of the chairs, arms crossed over his chest in a way that looks more protective than intimidating.

“Wells Jaha,” Bellamy says. “The son of the first guy we found with the chips.”

“He got in touch with me the night we met with the Commander, and he’s been updating me since then via grocery list.”

Monroe frowns. “But that was weeks ago.”

Yes. Very stressful weeks. Thanks, Zoe.

“There are a lot of chipped people coming through the ER these days,” Clarke says. “With non-accidental injuries. They could be torturing people to take them, or hurting themselves. I don’t know. I didn’t want to risk it. But Raven and Monty have managed to make these—buzzer things.” They really do look like those prank ones, but with a little yellow light blinking happily. Clarke holds it out to the group like an offering. “They can tell whether someone is chipped.”

“I’m working on a better system.” Raven has to swallow almost an entire mouthful of popcorn to jump in. “Bracelets or something that’s more discrete. These have to be taped to your stomach or side, somewhere you’ll feel it but it won’t be visible. The stronger the vibration, the closer the chipped person. That also syncs up to a program Monty is working on that, if it works—”

“—When it works!”

“Whatever, Monty, *when* it works can show us a map of where they are. But—”

“I have to be careful,” Monty continues, seemingly done with his Mountain Dew high. Harper is still clutching the bottle. “Because if I end up too deep in their network, they might be able to tell I was there, and either change everything or go after us. Or both. And right now we need them to
“We don’t know much,” Bellamy adds. “They talk about seeing a woman in red named Alie, but we don’t have anything on motives. And a computer system can’t run itself. Someone has to be controlling it.”

“You also knew?” It’s the first time Octavia has spoken.

“O—”

Raven talks over him, but holds out her popcorn to Octavia in a gesture of solidarity. “There’s also a little light you can turn on if you want to make sure your buzzer isn’t just dead. It’s blue if there’s a chip in range.” She pauses like she’s waiting for them to get something. “Blue, geddit?”

“Blue?” Connor asks.

Clarke kind of wants popcorn, but Raven’s still justifiably pissed at her. So the chances aren’t good.

“Like Sting. No?” There’s a sense that they have all failed some level of nerd test, but Raven seems to waive off her disappointment as easily as the fly that’s been buzzing around her head. “So, blue if there’s a chip, and yellow if there isn’t, but for the most part you shouldn’t be looking at them. No one should know they’re there.”

“Does the Commander know? About the mind control?” Octavia asks, still with popcorn in her cheeks and still glaring at her brother. She’s bouncing a little on her toes.

“I told her.”

Now it’s everyone that’s staring at Clarke all betrayed-like, not just a few. Bellamy’s mouth is hanging open. “You told her? How did you know she wasn’t chipped?”

“Why would she have gotten us looking into all this if she was?” Clarke says, when the real answer is I didn’t and I hoped like hell. “But she needed to know the risk, too. I’m meeting with her on Thursday to give her a sensor so she can scan her people.”

Octavia’s bouncing increases a bit. She seems about ready to bolt. “Shouldn’t all her people have them, too?”

“You wanna get a job and buy me more plastic for my printer?” Raven asks. “We’re doing what we can. And I wasn’t aware we were going into mass production.”

There’s an accusation there. And it’s obvious in retrospect that Clarke can trust her people, but can they blame her for not wanting to risk it?

“Just make what you can,” Clarke says. “At least one for L—the Commander. Um, also, my mom is coming on Monday to look at the files we have from Mount Weather. And I’ve got a grocery list code set up with Wells, so he can tell us if he needs help escaping. It looks like things have been getting more intense there, so I’m officially adding their house—and the roof of the Spencer building—to patrols, so that there’s less a chance of missing him. He’s one of the ones that knows the most about the City without actually being in it, and knows about our involvement. And he’s a nice guy, so we don’t want him to become a pod person. Um, questions?”

Jasper raises his hand. “Do they all have everyone’s memories all the time? Wouldn’t that be like, too many memories?”
“The Sherlock Holmes limited brain space thing isn’t actually true,” Harper says.

Clarke can only shrug. “We don’t know.”

“Is Allie short for something, or is it in all capitals like an acronym, or is it the name of the person running it?” Connor asks. “Is the woman in the red dress real or computer generated?”

Clarke shrugs again.

“When you see the Commander on Thursday will you ask her how long they’re going to be doing repairs on Broad street?” It’s Miller. “It’s adding fifteen minutes to my commute.”

“She’s not going to know that.”

“But she’ll know people who know that.”

“Fine,” Clarke says. “Whatever.” At least this is something she can actually do. She could text Lexa now. Wouldn’t that be hilarious? I have an important question. One of my people is having transportation issues.

Although the roadwork on Broad street is pretty annoying.

“Why didn’t you tell us you met with her?” Bellamy asks, and maybe he’s trying to be subtle because he lowers his voice and tilts his head a bit, but they are in a small room with eight other people so any attempt at privacy is for nothing.

The answer is, she doesn’t know. She does know that Raven has been wary of the Coalition ever since Finn died, but no one else has any glaring vendettas that she’s aware of. “I’m telling you now,” Clarke says, trying to sound as firm as possible.

Octavia again. “You trust her?”

“Lexa, yes.” She does. She has to. Especially after— “We met up at Starbucks, and someone tried to poison one or both of us. It turned out that it was Gustus, trying to make her think that I was out to kill her. When she found out, she killed him. So yes, I trust her dedication to working together. But I don’t trust all of her people.”

“Gustus?” Miller’s mouth is hanging open. “The one we met?”

“Jesus.” Jasper grabs some of Raven’s popcorn without asking, but she lets him. “And we know that’s for real? She’s not just faking his death or hiding him somewhere?”

Monroe snorts. “That would be stupid. Why would she want to make us not trust her people?”

“She killed one of her right hand men.” Bellamy shakes his head slowly. “Jesus. Who are you getting into bed with, Clarke?”

Clarke flushes. “I am not getting into bed—” and that’s just a saying. She closes her eyes for a moment. “We can’t do this alone.”

That, no one can argue.
Writing this is always a struggle because my instinct is to go for funny, but like, has anybody in this show ever made a joke? Ever? People write Octavia and Raven as these goofballs and while I love it, it doesn't really fit in with their canon characterization. Sometimes they're sarcastic, I guess? (While I'm on a tangent about portrayals in fic, why do people think that Clarke would have been popular/party girl? She spent all her time drawing and playing chess with her one friend.)

Anyway. I should have internet more often now. We finally got electricity! So, that's a good. Thanks for everyone's comments on the last chapters. I'm never sure whether protocol is to respond to them or not if there's not direct questions asked, but I see them and I appreciate them.
Women in the Prequel

Chapter Summary

It's Clarke Griffin who approaches the motel, and Clarke Griffin who knocks, and Clarke Griffin who is terrified out of her mind waiting to see her mother. And it’s Clarke Griffin’s mother who opens the door and barely looks at her before pulling her into a hug.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for: Massive amounts of backstory. And Finn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The skies are such a flat grey they might as well be a photo studio backdrop: from her rooftop, Clarke feels a bit like she’s looking off the edge of the world.

She’s got a pair of binoculars trained on the Ark across the street. Waiting. Waiting. She’d been pacing until Bellamy had yelled at her to sit down, so now she’s just itching for either a piece of charcoal or a fistfight.

A car pulls up. It only has one thing in common with the last half-dozen: it’s not her mother’s. A couple climbs out and runs to one of the rooms.

Ugh.

It’s not that she hates the idea of couples. She’s just feeling particularly bitter about everything today.

It’s six thirty, and she’s been there all afternoon. She was being generous when she said eight pm, factoring in a lot of sleep and rest stops. But maybe something has happened. Maybe there was an accident. Maybe there was an “accident.” There’s so many more ways for things to go wrong in a one-ton human operated death traps surrounded by other one-ton human operated death traps than on a mostly automated airplane with rigorous screening for those involved. What had Clarke been thinking, saying to drive? She could have—

Another car pulls in.

It’s not the car she remembers from childhood, that beat up Jeep that had taken her to school and on camping trips and visits to her father’s parents. It doesn’t even have the stupid Christmas bauble hanging on the rearview mirror. But it does have her mother’s silhouette in the driver’s seat, DC plates, and an ‘eat local’ bumpersticker.

She’s here.

She’s here and she’s alive and Clarke has walked into obvious traps less afraid.
“Is that her?” Bellamy asks, like he’s asked about every other car containing a solitary woman. But this time it is, and Clarke can only nod and stand up. Her legs are shaking.

Pathetic.

“That’s her,” she agrees. “Let’s give her time to check in.”

She isn’t stalling. Skylark doesn’t stall. But Skylark does watch as her mother checks in to the motel, goes back outside, glances around a bit, and then walks down the row of what once were green doors to number nine. She’s wearing a coat and carrying a blue backpack, and then she looks around once more and goes inside.

“Okay,” Clarke says. Breathe in, breathe out. She’d broken herself of the name list habit ages ago, but she almost wants to go through it again. Instead, she heads to the back of their current building where they won’t be seen and pulls herself down. They’d gotten the name Sky Crew because of their tendency to come from above: Clarke has the easiest time of it, but Bellamy beats her down via a belaying line.

And then it’s the quick Clark Kent shuffle, into civvies, because they weren’t just the people in masks on the top of the building, no sir.

So it’s Clarke Griffin who approaches the motel, and Clarke Griffin who knocks, and Clarke Griffin who is terrified out of her mind waiting to see her mother. And it’s Clarke Griffin’s mother who opens the door and barely looks at her before pulling her into a hug.

“Mom—” Clarke says, and her voice is cracking a little bit. “Hi.”

She’s squeezed tighter.

Her chip-scanner doesn’t buzz.

And she wants to relax and fall into it because it’s been so long since she’s been hugged this way, hugged at all, really, besides bro-ly back claps. So she lets herself cling as well, just for a moment, and then Bellamy clears his throat and Abby pulls away.

It’s probably for the best. The door is open. Anyone could drive by.

“Come in,” Abby says, and they shuffle obediently into the motel room. It’s got all the class Clarke expects from the Ark: peeling grey wallpaper, narrow bed, airplane-sized bathroom. She opens her mouth to speak but her mother shakes her head. “Just let me look at you.”

(What does she see? Does she see the blood on Clarke’s hands? Does she see all the people Clarke has tried to help? Does she see the child Clarke was, before everything?)

Bellamy sticks out a hand after another moment, and god bless him, for bearing the awkwardness and trying to shove it aside. “Bellamy.”

“She.”

They shake hands. It’s not a coordinated motion.

“We’re going to leave in a few minutes. Separately,” so that they can talk, or whatever, and so they’ll be harder to trace, “but you have to have enough contact with Bell so that he’ll be able to locate you if something happens.”
“Just a precaution,” he says, in his best security guard let-me-search-your-bags voice.

“So you can… locate me?” Abby asks slowly. She leans against the wall, and rubs her hands against her pants. She’d looked at Clarke, but it’s only now that Clarke can really bring herself to look back: her mother is older, obviously. Her hair is still long, but she’s wearing it loose, not the side braid of Clarke’s childhood. There are more grey streaks in it. More lines on her face.

She’s not wearing her wedding ring.

“I can sense the motion of people through space and cross reference that to a memorized city map,” Bellamy says. “If I’ve had more contact with an individual, then I can more accurately pinpoint their present location.”

“He’s like Apple.”

“I see.” Abby doesn’t look like she sees. “And this is— this is your—”

She clearly can’t bring herself to say ‘superpower.’ Which is going to make it harder to get to ‘mind control computer program slash artificial intelligence,’ but they’ll work up to it.

“It’s a skill that I was not born with,” Bellamy says.

“That’s so odd. That suggests— it’s not even an animal-like tracking ability. Is it biologically or technologically based? Does it work if someone doesn’t have a cell phone or GPS on them?” And there’s Dr. Griffin taking over. Bellamy sort of shrugs.

“You can look in the files,” he says. “I’ll let Clarke do the explaining.”

So kind of him. Bellamy leaves with a cheerful wave and a walk very much unlike his Homer stealth trek. And then she’s alone with her mother for the first time in years, with no prison guards listening in or watching, no table between them, nobody and nothing

"Let’s get in the car,” Clarke says. “It’s around the corner.”

“You parked around the corner?”

“And a couple blocks down,” Clarke admits. It’s a little farther than she’d like, but if nothing else, she has to trust that her secret identity is, well, a secret. It’s not like she never goes out. She just— doesn’t go out with her mother. “We can talk there. Or— whatever.”

_Or whatever._ She’s turning back into a teenager.

“So that was Bellamy?” Abby asks, a little awkward. More than a little awkward. “He seems, not like how you described him.”

Oh. “It’s been a long time,” Clarke says, which sums up the entire situation, really. “But he grew on me. Also, he stopped being, you know. Quite so awful.”

“Oh.”

“Once he stopped trying to lead by anarchy,” Clarke elaborates, even though they had liberally applied some anarchy at the end there.

They get into the car, close the doors, and Clarke lets herself relax again as she pulls out into the empty road. “So the situation,” she says, then stops, then starts again, clearing her throat. “The situation. You were having some trouble with the concept of, um, powered people. But there’s
some sort of— computer program that is either making people very suggestible or overriding their will entirely.” She explains the City of Light as best she can, leaving out Wells Jaha, Lexa, the Coalition in general, and— well. It comes out to a big round of fuck all. “But we have this box of—we stole a lot of the research from the lab at Mount Weather. Since a lot of what seems to be happening mirrors what was done to us. Changing the way our brains work, creating connections for motions and things that were never there before. We thought we might be able to use the research to figure out a way to shut the City down, but we all understood exactly none of it.”

“You needed a neuroscientist.” Abby doesn’t sound as hurt by this as Clarke thought she would have. “So you called me.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry.”

“Clarke—”

“It’s dangerous. It’s incredibly dangerous. Just— let me talk, okay? If they get you, you know me, they know I’d come to get you, they could have all your memories. You’ve met me, you’ve met Bellamy, I’m taking you back to where I live. So it’s really dangerous for me. And it’s dangerous for you, if anyone makes us. And it should be fine, because I’ve been living here and having a job like everyone else here for years, but before not everybody was tapped into one hive of knowledge. I mean, there was always the internet. But Monty can sort of control some of the internet.”

“Is that why mentions of you disappear so quickly?” Abby asks.

She’d noticed that? She’d been following them?

So she’d known, the whole time, at least a bit of what Clarke had been up to.

“Yes,” Clarke says. “Except this we can’t hack. Or stop. So having any secrets just got very, very hard in this city. And there are people I’m protecting. So we’ll get you hooked up with a scanner so that you know if someone is chipped— in the City of Light— and if you see them, don’t let them know you know. Kill them if you have to.” It’ll blow her cover, but it’ll give them all time to run. “And you can’t take a chip, no matter what they threaten you with. If they get us. Okay? They could be holding a knife to my throat and they could kill me—”

“Clarke—”

“And you do not take a chip. I need you to promise.”

“I can’t—”

“If one of us is chipped they will be able to kill everyone I care about,” Clarke says. She stops at a red light, and it’s good, maybe, because she can turn and look Abby in the face. “They will kill everybody I care about. So it doesn’t matter what they do. Nothing is worth that. Understand?”

“I understand,” Abby says. She looks like she wants to argue, and god, Clarke might be dying for a fight. She could kill time later going on an extra patrol. Or not. Fuck. She’d sent Octavia to watch over the Jaha house, because he’d been listing more spicy foods in his grocery list and if she’s interpreting it right then that means that stuff is getting more dangerous over there. But being able to delegate means that she won’t be able to use it as her distraction.

“And you can leave. If you need to leave, you do that, because if they kidnap you and they hold a knife to your throat and tell me to take a chip—” she can’t say it. She can’t say it. She can’t look away from the road, doesn’t want to know what face her mother is making. But Abby understands what she’s saying. Clarke would let her die.
“Clarke, what’s happened? The last few years. What— how did you— putting the City aside for a second. What’s happened?”

“Well we got out of Mount Weather,” Clarke says, glossing over how they did that. “And, um. So there was all the news and the government got involved, you heard about that. So they set us up in this building, assuming it’d be temporary. Except it’s free rent. And not long after we got there—” she tightens her fingers on the steering wheel and almost forgets to turn on her indicator. “Not long. Maybe a few weeks. There was this little girl— little, she was twelve, her name was Charlotte. And we thought we were— not safe, but Bellamy was really tight with her, and so if she got lost or whatever, no big deal, right? He’d be able to find her. Except she didn’t get lost. She, um—” Fuck. “She got shot. One afternoon. Don’t know who did it, or why, or if it was on purpose, or anything. We’d just been trying to figure out if she could go back to school, Monty was going to hack her some records, and she was just gone. Like that. And we couldn’t— we couldn’t even claim her body. Because we weren’t supposed to show up anywhere official. We couldn’t give the police any leads to go off of, we couldn’t just show up and say “yes, this is one of ours, we don’t know where her parents are but we’ve been taking care of her,” we couldn’t— we couldn’t do anything. We just let them find this little Jane Doe and her body just sat— until—” she takes another breath. “Monty had completely changed our pasts, the military had promised to protect us, but this would— this would be public. They would be able to find us. So there was nothing we could do.”

“Clarke.”

“And Finn— Finn was all like, we have these powers, we should stay together, and really make them useful, you know? We’d sort of been planning to scatter, but we didn’t— I didn’t want to, at least. We’d sort of become a— family, and there were so few of us left, there were twelve out of a hundred, and at some point we thought someone might start up Wallace’s work again. But there was also, in the meantime, all this shit happening. I mean, fuck. So we started going around Arkadia at night, just keeping an eye on things, you know. There was this group that controlled most of the neighborhood— not part of the Coalition, though that wasn’t uncommon at the time. They were just this group of mid-thirties white guys with shitty tattoos and bikes with the mufflers broken, and for a while they just had a protection racket going, but then they started having people killed. And so we took them out, that’s when we started being, you know, known. Plus we’d taken out what Arkadia had in the way of law and order, so we ended up… filling the power vacuum. We made up code names. They were funny, you know? Except then the Arkers— the gang— came in looking for revenge, so we had to wear masks. But it was going fine. Except maybe we should have scattered after all, because there were some people from Mount Weather still alive. It was, hell, maybe six months after we’d set up as Sky Crew? Carl Emerson, the security guard, comes back to town. Not just to the city, but to Arkadia. We weren’t sure, at first. We just hear that there’s a man who knows who Sky Crew are and what they can do. That he has information on us he’s willing to sell. So we figure out who he’s planning to meet, and it’s too fucking easy, but we just thought he underestimated Monty’s powers. He and Raven ID the guy he’s supposed to be selling to, and the guy he’s working with— another Mount Weather guard, Lovejoy— and the plan was to get all three of them— Emerson, Lovejoy, whoever wanted the information— at the meetup. But then Finn and Murphy ran into Lovejoy on the street in Tond Circle.”

She can’t do this. She has to do this. She’s never needed to tell this story.

It’s not exactly a ballad. Maybe she should have figured out what she was going to say first. How to tell it so that it’s not block paragraphs of rambling and false starts, but Abby seems to be following, if the growing horror on her face is anything to go by.

“I was at work. I was at work and Emerson had jammed my phone. So I had no idea what was going on.” Just checking in patients, scanning insurance cards, nodding sympathetically when the
triage nurse made eye contact when another patient took themselves too seriously. “Finn and Murphy corner Lovejoy in the drugstore. And Emerson, fucking Emerson is two steps ahead. He’d sent Lovejoy there on purpose. So he calls the store, makes the clerk put him on speaker. Tells them he’s kidnapped me. He had some recordings of my— voice,” her voice, her screams, her curses, that he’d gotten out of Mount Weather. “Managed to convince them— convince Finn, at least, that he’d taken me hostage. So Finn threatens to kill Lovejoy if he doesn’t let me go. And of course Emerson doesn’t, so Finn shoots. But it’s fucking Tond Circle, and everyone has a gun in Tond Circle. And people there don’t really know or trust Sky Crew. So suddenly Finn looks around and he just sees weapons—” or at least that’s how he’d described it to her later, and maybe she just wants to believe that, wants to believe that he hadn’t just unleashed his emotions in gunfire. Wants to believe that he wasn’t a complete—

Monster? Murderer?

“It’s okay,” Abby says. “You don’t have to—”

She does. Clarke pulls up in front of the Dropship building, puts the car in park, but doesn’t make any move to get out. She doesn’t think she can. “And so Finn just starts shooting. Everyone who runs. Everyone who stands still. Everyone with something shiny. Even fucking Murphy knew it was fucked up— Murphy was a wreck, he was in juvie for murder in the first place, guy was psychotic— but even he knew that this wasn’t okay. Around then Raven had managed to disable the jammer, so they get in touch with me, confirm I’m alive, and I ran to Tond Circle— well, I stole a moped— and I get there and he’s just standing in front of the candy stand at the register, and there are bodies everywhere—"

Clarke still sees the bodies sometimes. There had been a woman, maybe forty five, with a dent in her finger that suggested a recently removed wedding ring, a recent divorce. A kid, maybe eighteen, nineteen, with orange beads on the end of his corn rows. “And of course the Coalition was out for his head, there had been a few of theirs in there. You know the Coalition— it’s basically the mafia, except, in the name of law and order.” She should tell that one to Lexa, she’d think it’s funny. “They have more power here— the Commander, Lexa, she managed to stop gang violence and get them to work together like a fucking lifetime movie, she’s amazing. But they can’t just let their people get gunned down, especially in Tond Circle. Of course the police were after him, in theory, but they answered to Lexa. And—

“And they were going to move on Arkadia. They’d have torn it apart looking for Finn, and we wouldn’t have been able to protect the people we had taken responsibility for. We couldn’t protect them anyway, but Monty kept it offline and all that did was let the story escalate from person to person. He murdered eighteen people, which was horrifying enough on its own, but in some versions I heard it was fifty, eighty. They didn’t trust us, and they were right not to trust us. And so I— I called up one of Coalition’s tip lines. I gave them a time and a place, said I would hand Finn over. In public. Because it had to be in public, people had to see me do it. They had to see that I wasn’t going to stand by him after this. So I told Finn we were running, and we ran, and I stabbed him in the back with a paralytic I’d stolen from work. Gave him to the Coalition guys. Everyone could see I’d done it, everyone could see he was alive when he went into their van.

“But I couldn’t—” God. Clarke wants to bang her head against the steering wheel, and only manages to stop herself when she imagines the sound of the horn. Abby makes a move like she wants to hold Clarke’s hand, or rub her back, but she doesn’t. “Going back to prison— wasn’t an option. Any trial or sentencing would expose the rest of us, and he’d rather— he’d rather have died, than go back. There was a chance the Coalition would just kill him, but then they would have his body. They’d be able to learn what Wallace did to us, can’t let them do that either. So what I gave him, it took, fifteen minutes maybe to react. But he was dead before the van stopped driving. And
Bellamy tracked them down when they stopped and demanded that they cremate Finn—the body. And they’re pissed, and someone probably punched someone else, but eventually the Commander gets called and she tells them to get him—it—to a crematorium. So they all go. And so Finn’s burial was witnessed by Bellamy, four Coalition muscles, and the terrified guy who worked there. So that’s it.” She looks at her mom again. “Finn killed people. And I killed him.”

“Clarke.” Abby does reach out and touch her now, and Clarke collapses into her. She’s not crying. She’s not going to cry. It was years ago. And it’s over. And it’s—that’s it.

That’s it.

“So then it was business as usual until the City of Light happened and now we’re dealing with that. Uh, a few weeks after Finn died, Murphy took off to Vegas. Or he said he was going to Vegas. Bellamy said he was definitely in the Southwest, but he loses track after a few weeks. We should go inside.” Clarke hops out of the car without waiting for an acknowledgment, and marches up to the door. She waits until she can hear the car door slam, and footsteps behind her. “When you come by here, if I don’t answer, hit three-twelve. That’s—sort of our base. Try and get here when it’s either sunny or rainy—then you can wear either sunglasses and a hat or have your hood-up. Security camera is over your left shoulder. Don’t look at it,” she adds, when she can sense Abby starting to move. It always takes a bit of jiggling to get the key to turn, but she does it, goes through and holds the door open with her heel.

“Thanks,” Abby mumbles.

“So what about you. What have you been doing.” Clarke forgets to phrase it as a question, but she needs something to distract her mother from noticing too much of the narrow stairwell, the green growing around the edges, the crayon marks courtesy of two kids on the second floor. She’d stopped smelling it years ago, but she tries to smell it as Abby must be smelling it. Mold, sweat, rot, and humanity. Also, Axe body spray. That would be the fourteen year old boys from the second floor.

She hates those kids.

“What have I been doing?” Abby repeats, half a floor later like she’d forgotten Clarke had asked. “Um, well, still working at the hospital. Still… the same. Different patients. Oh, except for Gwen Tucker. She’s still hanging on.”

Clarke doesn’t remember Gwen Tucker or what was wrong with her brain. Tumor, probably. It’s usually tumors. “That’s great,” she says.

“Yeah.” They’re on the second floor. Someone is watching Fox News—she can hear a voice that, while muffled, sounds distinctly like Sean Hannity. And then it’s the third floor, with the door that shuts off one half of the hallway, that marks out their territory. It’s narrow, and she’s always known that but never felt so strongly—the walls are closing in on her, and she speeds up to get to her door before it collapses—

But it’s just her apartment. Just the walls of her building. Clarke rubs her eyes, unlocking the door with one hand. “So this is it,” she says, trying to sound cheerful. The number of tone shifts she’s tried to navigate in the last hour are going to drive her insane. “Mi casa.”

Abby walks in slowly behind her, taking in the art on the walls, the sparse furniture. “Clarke.”

“It’s cool. All my friends are here.” She smiles, and tries to make it as genuine as possible. “Long story aside, my life isn’t bad, not really. Plus I can do this!” She grabs a pen from the kitchen
counter and tosses it in the air. The lack of gravity around her hand isn’t enough to stop it coming down, but it means that it bounces back up— until it gets more than an inch away, and then it’s back down. She lets it bounce for a few moments. Her mother’s lips twitch, and it looks like she’s about to say something—

But that’s when her door bursts open. Clarke’s jumped onto the counter and has her gun aimed over the top of the fridge at the door before she realizes it’s Octavia and Lincoln. Between them is Wells Jaha, whose dark clothes aren’t hiding the fact that he’s covered in blood.

“Hi,” he says.
Bughouse Chess

Chapter Summary

Stumbling in pain and stumbling while drunk aren’t quite the same stumble.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lincoln doesn’t fall in love quickly. He’s always been a strong believer in the gradual, in dipping his toe in first to get used to the temperature. In being able to see five steps ahead, so that when Luna decides she’s going to go live on a house boat in Seattle or it becomes clear that Sarah is more interested in his (then) ready supply of crack, he’s already seen it coming. He’s already eased himself backwards. Made the necessary detachment.

Correction: he doesn’t fall in love. He climbs into it slowly with a headlamp and a ladder.

Or at least he did. Because now he’s sitting on a rooftop, pressed against a woman he met only weeks ago. He has his eyes closed and his teeth scraping her neck and he thinks that he’s never loved anyone more in his life. A problem, as far as his personal philosophy goes, but in the moment he does not give a shit.

“One of us has to be watching,” Octavia says, even as she curls her hand around the back of his neck and presses.

“You can watch,” he mumbles, moving up to her ear. “You’re the one on duty.”

Octavia hadn’t texted him to tell him that she was bored on a stake-out: she’d texted him a heart emoji and a rocket ship. From that it had been easy to find her— although she wasn’t on top of the Spencer building like he had first assumed, but instead on a roof two houses away, tucked carefully into the darkness. The spot gives them a clear view into the kitchen of the neighboring house, as well as part of a hall and the bedroom of what Lincoln assumes is a college-aged boy. Judging by the chess trophies on the desk, no sex has ever been had there.

“I mean I’ll notice if something happens,” she says vaguely. “It’ll be pretty—”

Something breaks.

“—Obvious.” Turned off like a light, Lincoln jerks his head around and towards the house. A man — around Lincoln’s age, well past college— sock-surfs into the kitchen, looks around, and starts shoving the window open. Behind him is an older man, moving more slowly— he grabs a knife from the knife block just as Lincoln raises his gun, but Octavia grabs his elbow.

“He’s chipped.”

Shit.

Octavia’s got her dart gun out and moves to get a better angle through the open window, but her feet slip a little on the shingles and in that time the old man moves the knife, not towards the younger one, but to his own neck. He’s saying something— his son, it looks like his son, takes a
step back. And then the father stabs himself— not in the neck but in the arm, and he’s still talking but the son dives towards him and Octavia finally gets into a better position but there’s no clear target anymore with both going down. It’s the son who gets back up first, but he’s bleeding now, too, and the father stands and that’s when he gets three darts in his back.

He falls. And once again, his son rushes to him.

“What the fuck,” Lincoln says, even as he’s leaping and rolling off the roof. Octavia is right behind him, but first to the window, and she’s got it the rest of the way open and is through before he’s even standing again.

(He’s so impressive.)

(He’s so impressed.)


“He was going to kill himself,” The son— Wells— says, “I don’t—”

“We have to leave,” Lincoln doesn’t bother trying to get through the narrow window, now that the crisis has passed: it would take longer to get in and out than they have.

“But— he’ll bleed out—”

“Meet out back,” Octavia says, dragging Wells away by the arm. Lincoln tracks them through the windows, weaves around the bushes. Nearly trips over an overturned flower pot, but then he’s at the back door and it looks like Wells is the only one there, with the shadows as his crutch.

“He’ll bleed out,” he’s saying.

“They won’t let him. If they want you, he’s their best bargaining chip. But that means that ALIE is going to send someone over to save him any second, and we need to be gone.” Almost as Octavia speaks, the door to the house they were just sitting on flies open. Two people come out— one heads towards Wells’s front door, the other makes a dash for the garden.

Octavia fires, and the second figure goes down into the hedge.

“That’s Nancy, she’s got a bad hip—”

“She can’t feel it,” Lincoln says, leading them around towards the Spencer building parking lot.

“How badly are you bleeding?”

A pause. “I think I got stabbed.”

“You got scratched,” Octavia corrects. Headlights come down the street, and they all duck down behind one of the cars. They’re all just masses in the darkness: Lincoln could probably steal a car, get them out of Arkadia— or at least closer to the edge of Arkadia— and once he’s out, there are doctors he trusts not to be chipped. Hell, if he had better light and equipment maybe he could just fix Wells up himself, but for all the talk about just a scratch there was still a hell of a lot of blood. And depending on where that scratch was—

“The ER is all City of Light,” Octavia is continuing, voice barely above a whisper. “We gotta get him to Skylark. We’re closer anyway.”

Just down the block. Lincoln’s never been in the Dropship building, but he’d learned where they
lived a long time ago. Had been putting that knowledge to use when he ran into Octavia two days after the official meet-up. It was a coincidence, in as much as anything involving people like them is a coincidence: he’d been looking for her and she’d been looking for him and they just happened to be looking for each other in the same place. Or at least, that’s how he’s going to tell it. With all the details, it might sound a little more like stalking.

He doesn’t know how good Skylark is at first aid, but they don’t have many choices.

“Okay.” Lincoln ducks down next to Wells, and gets an arm under his shoulder. “You scout ahead?”

“Yes.” There’s no motion, no sign that Octavia has left their side. But he knows.

The cold of the cement goes through his pants when he kneels, adjusting Wells’s weight, the other man throwing him off balance. Around them, cars are moving—there is no noise from the recently abandoned house, but that doesn’t mean that doesn’t mean that there’s nobody there. The silence doesn’t mean that they’re safe.

But nobody stops them as they wind through the back alley, barely five feet wide between the buildings. The City of Light may have its share of shadows, but Lincoln has held a shadow in his arms and she is keeping them safe now.

“Fuck,” Wells mutters. The word sounds strange coming out, like he’s not used to saying it. “Fuck, shit, fuck.”

“Quiet,” Lincoln mutters back.

“Sorry.”

But he’s holding up better than most civilians would have, under the circumstances. Lincoln waits for Wells to melt off his arm into a pool of tears and hysteria, but he doesn’t. And it occurs to him, belatedly, that just because Wells isn’t used to this sort of pain doesn’t mean he can’t handle it.

They stop behind the Dropship building. Far ahead, a streetlamp flickers. Right next to them, a shadow moves.

“There’s a maintenance ladder that we usually use to get up,” Octavia whispers. “But I don’t think Wells can climb.”

“I can climb,” Wells hisses.

“Can you lift your arm without opening the cut even further?”

Silence.

“I’ll go up and throw you guys down some hoodies. Put those on, go around front, pretend to be drunk or something. I’ll buzz you in and you can climb up the stairs. See you in a minute.” Lincoln can feel Octavia’s hand on his shoulder. The brush of lips against his cheek.

He can’t see her.

They wait.

Two minutes later— one hundred twenty seconds, one hundred and eleven heartbeats, eleven cars driving past and five nearby footsteps— two hoodies come flying out a third floor window. They
drop into a heap on the ground with no fanfare, and Lincoln carefully disentangles himself from Wells before pulling one on.

“I still can’t raise my arm,” Wells says.

“Wear it like a poncho.”

He wears it like a poncho, and Lincoln slings an arm around his shoulders to try and mask that best he can. “Walk like you’re drunk.”

Five steps later:

“Have you ever been drunk?”

“I’m twenty-eight,” Wells snaps back. “Of course I’ve been drunk. I’ve just never been stabbed.”

“Scratched.”

Pause. “Also, I don’t drink very much.”

Of course he doesn’t. Stumbling in pain and stumbling while drunk aren’t quite the same stumble, but they get around the corner and to the alcove and Lincoln realizes he doesn’t know which buzzer to press. And they can’t just stand there awkwardly, not calling anyone, so he does the next best thing.

“Octaaaaaaaviaaaaaa,” he sings, trilling the second A. If someone is asked about this later, they’re not going to remember any faces. They’re just going to remember two brothers hollering to beat shit. There are only a couple people in the street, but they start walking just a little bit faster. And if any of them are chipped, well— men on the run don’t carry on like they are. No reason to suspect them. “Octaaaviiiaaa! We’ve come to see youuuuu!”

“Octaviaa!” Wells bleats, when Lincoln pokes him. A second later, the door buzzes.

And Lincoln might have a sore throat. He doesn’t think he’s ever spoken that loudly in his life.

“It’s only like ten o’clock,” Wells hisses as they go up the stairs. “How would we be this drunk by now?”

Lincoln ignores him. If they have to, they can swing down the stairs— the railings are just far enough apart at the turns that he could ladder down them without falling. Wells wouldn’t be able to, though— he also wouldn’t be able to go down the ladder. So if they’re attacked, they’re just going to have to defend without running away — which could be easier if the rest of Sky Crew is there, or harder if the rest of Sky Crew is there, depending on what’s happening—

The third floor door doesn’t open for them, so they have to stand there awkwardly while Octavia runs down the hall to meet them.

“I’ve checked them, they’re both clear,” Octavia says as she helps manhandle Wells into a chair. This just means that Clarke has to get up and scan Octavia— and then bump into Lincoln for good
measure, just to be sure—before kneeling down in front of the injured party. He’s jarringly out of place. Her other lives come into her home all the time, of course, but not like this.

There’s never been anyone who wasn’t Sky Crew in her apartment, and now there’s three. At the same time. But one is hurt and she can’t spend too much time thinking about Lincoln because she’s pointing at the hoodie. “Get this off of him. Mom, first aid kit in the gold muffin tin by the microwave, bring it over here. Wells, what happened?” And where the fuck are—there. She grabs her latex gloves from the coffee table.

“Knife,” Wells says, the ending getting muffled as Octavia yanks the hoodie rather unceremoniously over his head. Static electricity cracks around him for a second, and Clarke looks to where he’s got his hand protectively over his upper side. “Tried to get it away from my dad, he was going to kill himself if I didn’t take the chip—”

Clarke holds out her hand behind her. “Scissors!”

A pause, and then she can feel the weight of them landing in her hand. Then it’s up the front of the shirt, just so she can peel it back around the injured area and shit, that’s a lot of blood. “There’s a box of wipes on the shelf next to the bowls,” she says. “Someone grab them. Um, there’s another one in the bedroom on my dresser. Someone grab that one too.”

Octavia darts towards the bedroom and Lincoln to the kitchen and Abby squats down next to her. “Do you want me to do this?”

“It’s fine.” Abby hasn’t been on ER rotation for years. “Just—hand me stuff. Really.”

“Skylark’s great at this,” Octavia says when she returns, yanking out a handful of wipes and shoving them in Clarke’s face. Clarke bats them away before she can inhale too much antiseptic, and starts dabbing at the cut. Please don’t need stitches, please don’t need stitches. “She sewed me up like, six weeks ago, and you can barely see it at all now.”

The use of her code name is jarring. “You’re in my house,” she sighs. “You might as well call me Clarke. This is Octavia.”

“Lincoln sort of already told me that—ahssssss.”

“Sorry!” Clarke says.

“Sorry,” Lincoln adds.

“Yeah and I’m real excited to learn how Lincoln knows Octavia’s name.” It’s going to fucking need stitches. “Emla cream!”

Abby hands it over. “Are you sure—”

“It’s fine!” and these are going to have to be the best fucking stitches of Clarke’s entire life, or her mom is going to think her totally incompetent. Shit. It’s not what she should be worried about, but now she’s here and Lincoln’s here and Wells is here and she has to convince them all that she knows what she’s doing, and that she can be trusted to lead this group of motley millennial.

Someone hands her the Emla cream. “It’s the best I can do for numbing,” she says, dabbing it on the area. “It’s going to hurt. I’m sorry.”

“It already hurts,” Wells mutters.
“Great. Suture kit!”

Abby hands it over. “You said your dad did this to you?”

“It wasn’t him,” Wells says. “He’s chipped. But they must have figured out I’ve been communicating with you guys, because I guess ALIE decided that what I know is worth more than him, now.” Which implies an agenda and a motivation that can’t be just the machine. Clarke grits her teeth, and doesn’t warn Wells before making the first stitch. Emla cream isn’t as good as an actual injected local anesthetic, but she saves those for gunshots.

“You should probably stay here,” she says. “Until this blows over.” Read: until they wipe out the City of Light or the City of Light wipes out them. “Because now hundreds of people are going to be looking for you. It’s not safe to go outside.” Or look out the window. Or use any device with a front-facing camera. Or—

“Hundreds?” Wells echoes, hissing again as Clarke makes another stitch. “There’s at least five thousand people in the City of Light. Maybe closer to eight.”

Clarke stops. “What.” Out of the corner of her eye, she can see Octavia’s jaw drop, and Lincoln lean into her.

“I mean, it might be more now. It grows exponentially, you know, because people get their friends who get their friends—”

“I know what exponential growth is!” Shit, shit, shit. She takes another second to make sure her hands aren’t shaking before she continues. *Holy shit holy shit holy shit.* “Octavia. My phone is in my back pocket. Can you take it out, speed dial three, and hold it up to my ear?”

It’s a sign of how shaken Octavia must be that she doesn’t protest. “Passcode?”

“Oh-two-one-four.” Her hands are covered in blood. They’re always covered in blood, these days. “Just two more, Wells.” Then there’s the sound in her ear of a phone ringing—*please pick up, please pick up, please pick up.*

*“Leave a message,”* Lexa’s voice says.

Fuck.

“Hey, it’s me. Wells Jaha is bleeding all over my living room and at least five thousand of his dad’s friends are looking for him. Call me. Bye.” She tilts her head away from the phone.

“Should I hang up?” Octavia asks.

“Yes.”

That’s going to be a weird ending to an urgent message.

“Also, you have until she calls me back to decide what I should tell her when she asks why Lincoln just happened to be there.” Last stitch. Clarke grabs another wipe. “Once I’ve bandaged this you should lie on the other side, keep it elevated as best you can.”

“Wait, that was the Commander?” Abby asks. “The one who—”

“You’re on ‘hey it’s me’ terms with the Commander?” Octavia says at the same time. “What?”

“Ow.” That’s Wells.
“Everyone shut up,” Clarke says, as politely as she can. “Think short term here, guys. O’s right, Wells, you should stay here. Mom, I know you were gonna look at the papers, but with all this maybe you can wait until tomorrow?”

“She can go through them in three-twelve,” Octavia says. “I can supervise, or whatever. I mean, there’d probably be space to sleep if you needed.”

“She can’t sleep here,” Clarke interrupts.

“Of course I—”

“The Coalition knows where we live, and there’s ten times more chipped people than we thought. If they come here, I don’t want you on this hall.” She turns, gets a good look at Abby for the first time since shit hit the fan. She looks the same, of course she looks the same, but her eyes are wider, mouth pressed into a thin line.

“And you think I like leaving you in danger?”

“This is my life.” Not the best argument, but it’s what she has. “That doesn’t mean you can’t stay safe at the hotel. You’re the only one with a chance at making sense of the medical stuff, we need you to be okay.”

“We can have Raven completely deck you out in panic buttons,” Octavia adds. “I’ll take you down to see her? We’ll get you guys buzzers, too.”

“Good idea.” Fewer people in here is always a good idea. “I’ll clean this up. Can you tail my mom back to the hotel, make sure she gets in okay? I know it’s not your shift— anymore—”

“Of course.”

"Clarke."

"It’s okay, mom." Clarke can’t stand up or hug her or anything, but she gives what she hopes is a reassuring smile. "I’ll see you tomorrow."

It takes a couple minutes of wrangling to get the three of them out the door, off to go bother Raven. And then there were two. Clarke finishes patting down Wells’s last bandage, and then stands. “Do you want a hand over to the couch?” It's a shitty couch that someone had left in their front yard with a FREE sign. She’d been the fifth one to find one, so at that point they were pretty well practiced at getting sofas up three flights of narrow stairs. Still, it hadn’t been fun.

“I can stand.” Wells proceeds to stand, and then flinch. “Shit. No, it’s okay.”

“Or you could go lie on my bed. You can have that tonight.”

“I’m not going to take your bed.”

Her bed. Pillows and blankets and it sounds so enticing right now, but she’s not going to sleep. Anyway. “You’re injured. Depending on how long you stay maybe we can work out some sort of turn system.” Which is, actually, something to consider. Clarke helps Wells settle on his side, refrains from offering to draw him like one of her French girls. “Do you have any family out of town you can go stay with?”

“I’m not leaving.” Wells actually tenses his arms like he’s going to get back to his feet, just to make a point. “It’s my dad out there. He’s— there’s got to be a way to save him. He’s still in there.
Right?"

“I don’t know.” She gets blood on the faucet when she turns it on, and splashes at it inefficiently. All that does is get water on the counter. “If there is, we’ll find it.”

“He’s going to be so upset when he realizes what he did.”

Waking up, realizing that you tried to hurt your son, tried to hurt yourself to hurt your son—and fuck knows what else Jaha has been doing these last couple months. Thousands of people. Christ, how are they supposed to fight thousands of people?

“I can help.” Wells is saying now. “I mean, maybe not with beating people up, but I could even just — cook you guys dinner so that that’s one less thing you have to do, or something.”

“For fuck’s sake, I’m not going to make you cook me dinner. You’re going to be helpful enough with what you know about ALIE. Just— don’t go wandering off thinking you’re going to do something heroic. That’d make my life a lot easier.”

“No heroics. Got it.”

It’s silent then, or at least as silent as it ever gets in the Dropship building. Someone is playing heavy bass downstairs, there’s a car honking on the corner, Clarke bangs the lid on the garbage can as she throws out the used medical supplies and the paper towels she used to dry behind the sink. Her phone, buzzing in her pocket— she dries her hands inefficiently on her pants as she grabs it—

“Thank God.” She hits the answer button, then looks at Wells, tilting her head towards her room. “I’ll be in there. Hello?”

“Are you okay?”

That’s actually… really nice as a first question. Clarke tries not to smile as she closes her bedroom door. “I’m okay. Wells isn’t, but he will be.”

“Five thousand? Is he sure?”

“Five to eight thousand is what he said. And he seems to be. But if they wanted him specifically, it means it’s not just some sort of War Games machine that’s gone nuts. It’s making value judgments.”

“Someone’s out there giving it priorities. And they’re going after you.”

And it’s good that Lexa agrees with her. Doesn’t think she’s delusional. Although if there’s one theory Clarke would like to be delusional, it’s that one. Programs glitch. Programs can be predicted. People— people are harder.

“That whole good news thing from our last conversation didn’t last long, did it.” Clarke flops back onto her bed and stares at the ceiling. She’s been thinking of putting some Velcro up there so that she doesn’t bounce around it too much. Of course, then she’d have to put Velcro on her underwear, and that would be hard to explain. “I still have it though.” Maybe she should try and get the scanner to Lexa sooner. With that many more people in the City than they’d thought, they might not have three days.

“I look forward to it.” There’s the sound of Lexa clearing her throat. “Do you need somewhere for Wells to stay? I might be able to find something.”
“Nah. Lincoln and O— Shadow barely got him here unseen. I don’t think he can risk standing in front of a window, even.”

“Lincoln?”

Oops. Also, file under: whatever.

“Yeah, he and Shadow seem to be bumping into each other a lot.” Or bumping other things. Which is a mental image that isn’t— actually that bad, but Clarke shies away from it anyway. Octavia’s like her sister.

“I’m aware. It’s cute that he thinks I don’t know.”

Clarke closes her eyes. “He thinks you’ll be mad. Or something.”

“Pff.”

“So you’re not mad?”

“Why would I be?”

Lots of reasons. Split loyalties. The sneaking around. Lexa is Lincoln’s boss in a way that Clarke is definitely not Octavia’s, so maybe that just makes it less personal. Maybe there’s no reason to think that she would care. “I don’t know. Someone from the Coalition dating one of Sky Crew. I can’t imagine Indra’s happy.” Indra definitely hadn’t liked them.

“I’m saving telling her for a bad day so her reaction can cheer me up. But I’d be a hypocrite if I was against it, wouldn’t I?”

What. “What?”

“I told them Sky Crew were allies. I can’t just forbid him from seeing her. I mean, I could. But it wouldn’t make much sense.”

Of course. Obviously. Always logical, that’s Lexa. So why is she disappointed? “Good point.”

Something bangs in the background, and the Commander sighs. “I need to go deal with that. Watch your back, Clarke.”

“Keep me in the loop about this. And— you watch your back, too.”

“Bye, Clarke.”

“Bye, Lexa.”

Clarke allows herself thirty seconds of continued ceiling observation before she returns to the main room. Wells is still in a French-girl pose, but his head is craned around and he seems to be staring at the drawings and paintings that Clarke has tacked up all over the walls.

“Did you do these?”

“Yeah.” In her spare time, between being a superpowered vigilante and a barely-over-minimum-wage worker. She spends a lot of time wishing she had the time to paint, and a lot of the time she has not painting. Go figure.

Wells gestures at the long, thin one that goes from the couch to the edge of the kitchen cabinets. “I
really love this.”

Of course he does. Of course it’s that one. Clarke moves to stand in front of the colored pencil drawing. It had taken her weeks, to capture the segments of branches, the hint of roof in the distance. On one end, the leaves are in shades of red and orange— then dead and withered, with a dusting of snow— before they turn green again on the other side.

“It’s the view from my cell,” she says, before she can think about it too much. She’d spent hours staring at that sliver of daylight, the tree branches that she had imagined carrying her to freedom. Sometimes she imagined growing very small and climbing through, sliding down the branches into another world. She credits that tree with keeping her sane.

She’d taken a good long look at that tree, in the Aftermath. It wasn’t magical. It was just a tree.

“Your cell?” Wells asks. “Sorry, you don’t have to. Um.”


“Wasn’t that the one with the, ah.”

Clarke wiggles her fingers at him. “And thus Skylark was born.”

Wells takes a deep breath like he’s about to ask something really personal and/or insensitive, and she’s bracing herself, but what he comes out with instead is “I can’t believe your name is Clarke and your code name is Skylark. That’s basically Sky-Clarke. And that’s not even, I couldn’t decide if I should make a Clark Kent joke or not, but like, Sky Clarke? Really?”

Yeah, he has a point. Clarke sits down in the chair Wells had sat on when he first arrived, then realizes that she hadn’t checked to make sure there was no blood on it before Lexa called. Shit. But it’s too late now, so she doesn’t move. “Guess Python’s real name.”

“It’s not.” Wells has a look of horror that not even an army of five thousand mind controlled civilians had been able to cause. “Tell me it’s not Monty.”

She makes finger guns, and throws in the clicking sound for good measure. “In all fairness to him, he chose it because of the coding language.”

“The coding language was named after Monty Python.”

That sounds fake. She eyes him for a minute, but doesn’t argue. Which doesn’t mean she won’t Bing it later. Possibly several times— she’s close to having enough Bing points to get the Starbucks gift card. And thinking of Starbucks makes her think of Lexa again and it’s not her fault, okay, if there’s something about the Commander that makes Clarke want to trim her fingernails. It doesn’t mean anything.

“What’s Homer’s real name?” Wells is asking, jerking her back to the present. “Ulysses?”

That would be hilarious. “Nah. You’re not going to be able to guess that one.” Unless he’s a fan of pirates. Or socialist science fiction writers from the eighteen hundreds, and even then he’d have to make the connection. Bellamy’s name is ridiculous. “Also, I need to go to sleep, so you’re going to have to move.”

“I really can take the couch. I don’t think I can move very easily.” He blinks a few times. Well played, Jaha. “So I haven’t asked a lot of questions, because I’m really fucking tired and this really hurts and it’s way easier to make fun of your superhero names but that doesn’t mean I don’t have
them, and so can we like, make a time tomorrow where someone can tell me what the fuck is happening, and why you’re buddies with the Commander, and why it seems like your mom just got here, and what the papers are, and, promise you won’t kill my dad and, shit, I don’t even remember all the things that I’m confused about.”

“Sure.” She’s got to admire a man who schedules his conversations. She’s also got to figure out what she’s going to tell him, and what the answers even are. But for now, “do you want a blanket?” She’ll have to get him a toothbrush tomorrow. And more food. It’s not like she can ask him to pay for food, since he has nothing in the world anymore, but she’ll have to figure something out. Maybe get Monty to get her a scam credit card or something.


And then weeks of stress and hours of panic seem to take hold, because he drops his head back onto the couch and falls asleep.

Despite what she said, Clarke spends the rest of the night pacing.

Chapter End Notes

So the Python thing is real. That’s also why we have a spam folder. Programmers are nerds, guys.
Chapter Summary

If Clarke lived in another universe, or another life, she would say that nothing could ruin her good mood.

Chapter Notes

Contains internalized ableism.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wells, it turns out, is a champion chess player. Clarke, having only been denied her championship due to untimely incarceration, feels that her defeat of him would be the championship she never got.

She has yet to do so, but she’s gotten close.

The last two nights have found both of them in her living room, trading increasingly nerdy insults while Abby yells at them to shut up from her position by the files in Clarke’s bedroom. Clarke had also been driven by liquid courage to send Lexa that picture of the raccoon with the wobbly black eye patches, with a follow-up text of “look it’s you.” That had been yesterday night, and she’d spent the rest of it terrified that she’d crossed a boundary, only to receive a response this morning. It had been one of those yellow pokemon birds with the black stripes over its eyes.

There hadn’t been a caption. It had made her grin uncontrollably anyway.

And she’s going to see Lexa once she gets off work, give her a buzzer and finally relieve that particular nagging worry.

If Clarke lived in another universe, or another life, she would say that nothing could ruin her good mood. But she lives in this one, and she knows of five to eight thousand things that really, really could.

Starting with the fact that her sensor goes off when she greets Nina the triage nurse.

Nina had been clean last time their shifts overlapped. But it’s fine. Clarke deals with chipped people every day, at this point. So she smiles, greets Nina like normal, and makes sure all her clothing is tucked in when she sits down at the desk. Just in case.

It used to be easy to tell who was in the City of Light. They never shut up about it. But Nina doesn’t act like anything’s changed— she even rolls her eyes in Clarke’s direction while shooing a code green out the door.

Clarke smiles back. On the keyboard, her hands shake. Because unless ALIE has a sleep mode, then she’s going to a lot of effort to make sure that Clarke doesn’t suspect anything. And if they
don’t want Clarke to suspect anything, that may be because they suspect Clarke.

She just has to get through four more hours. Four hours and then she and Lexa can come up with a plan.

Four hours, but the waiting room has far more people than Clarke has scanned insurance cards. Even at one friend per patient, that’s—

*Act natural.* Clarke takes a drink from her water bottle, then makes a note to quit this job. She’s liked it. It’s been good. Let her keep a thumb on Arkadia’s racing pulse. But they don’t pay her enough to deal with mind controlled civilians, and frankly, she has enough of those in her night job.

She just has to get through today.

Red lights flash against the windows and for a second she lets herself get lost in the rushed routine — a car accident victim, heavy bleeding from the shoulder, his anxious girlfriend trailing behind. She stops at the desk, turns to hand Clarke an ID, and it’s only because the flashing light reflects off of it that she sees the gun.

Her body prepares to duck; her face pretends it hasn’t noticed. And shit, Clarke wishes for her own. But keeping guns on the desk is the type of thing that the security camera looming over her shoulder frowns upon. And now that she’s watching for it, everyone is poised to stop waiting— the woman by the big fake plant, angled just away from her. The dad and child on the children’s sofa, motions too slow to be in true distress. Raven’s buzzer is useless here; it’s at a steady hum, alerting her to the danger but not pointing her to it.

She has time for exactly one move.

And she could text the Crew for help, but they’re not going to get here in time. It could be leading them into an ambush. And if she looses whatever’s about to happen— then they’ll get her phone, which is pretty heavily encrypted, but this ALIE is a very powerful computer system herself (itself?) and there’s no doubt that they’ll be able to get into it eventually. Leading them to the others. So Clarke pretends she doesn’t see the people watching her as she pulls her phone from her back pocket. Without looking— without letting it be visible over the top of the desk— she fumbles with the back, popping it off, sliding out the SIM card.

She makes eye contact with the woman by the plant.

Takes a deep breath.

And slips the card into her open water bottle before dropping below the desk, just in time to have a tranq dart hit the back of her chair. Clarke reaches out and snags it before turning, standing, and throwing all in one motion. It hits plant woman in the arm, and she stumbles.

The dad from the couch pulls out another gun. “Skylark,” he says. “You need to come with us.”

Yeah. There’s no point in bluffing, really, after her (awesome, if she says so herself) dart throw. To get to the door, she’s going to have to get over the desk and make it fifteen feet. There are two people in the way. And who knows how many outside.

“Why?” she asks, ducking again— there’s someone running towards the desk now, and she grabs for something— anything— what she gets is the landline, and she swings, not seeing— she hits the man in the forehead and loops the cord around his neck before shoving him forwards, and she shouldn’t kill him because he doesn’t know what he’s doing but how do you stop someone who can’t feel pain? The next dart misses her entirely but it lands too high on the wall for her to grab
without becoming an even bigger target.

Shit shit shit fuck.

But Atom didn’t die so she could let herself be captured by a robot overlord. Miles didn’t die so she could let herself be captured by a robot overlord. She used to recite their names to herself, when she was scared: the ones whose deaths Tsing had learned from so that when it finally came round to Clarke, she survived. There were twelve dead so she could fly, about nine dead for each living member of Sky Crew, and she’s not going to let it be for nothing.

So she dives over the top of the desk and behind another potted tree.

“Tell me what you want,” she tries again, because there’s no point dying ignorant.

“Nobody is left wanting in the City of Light,” is the response she gets— from a kid, Jesus— and that’s not helpful at all. Then one of them’s on her and she grabs his arm, and fighting skills can be programmed but instincts can’t and so when she twists his arm he drops the trang gun and when she kicks him in the back of the knee he falls, and she gets his own dart into his back and there’s another one and she shoots that one down too, hoping that they do want her alive and hoping that these darts don’t kill because she has enough deaths on her back and these people can be saved and they will solve this, they will fix them. They have to.

But there’s a dart flying right for her face and Clarke reaches out her other hand towards it— weighing it down because— that one inch force field of warped gravity around her is enough to turn its point to the ground when it’s in range, but she has to jump away so that it doesn’t hit her toe, and she has to get out of this corner and there’s a hand on her arm and she shoves the hand’s owner face first into the tree, jumps over their back, and then someone yells “STOP” and she doesn’t stop but then there’s a scream.

Nina has a kid under her arm and is holding a scalpel to her throat. The kid whimpers. And she can’t be older than ten—

“Put down the gun,” Nina says, “or I slit this girl’s throat.”

The girl squeaks again.

“How do I know she’s not chipped too?” Clarke asks, because this is sick, this is sick, but she could be faking.

“She would still die.”

Hippocratic oaths don’t mean what they used to.

And Clarke could fire, hit Nina in the neck just over the top of the girl’s head, but in that time the guy she’d brained with the phone gets to his feet and then there are darts coming at her from all directions and she’s able to point them downwards and one hits her calf, another goes through the top of her shoe, and she thinks, shit shit shit, and she thinks, I hope Lexa doesn’t feel stood up, and she thinks Really Clarke, Lexa’s feelings? That’s what you’re worried about? And she thinks, I almost made it, and she thinks, heavy, heavy, heavy.

When she falls, she weighs enough that she cracks the floor tile.
Raven’s leg hurts.

Raven’s leg always hurts. But sometimes she can turn it into background static— the YouTube video is funny and her leg hurts, this cookie is delicious and her leg hurts. Currently, it’s on override: Her leg hurts, so she can’t enjoy the mega stuff oreos. Her leg hurts, so Octavia’s voice has all the appeal of a persistent mosquito.

Her leg hurts. Her leg hurts. Her leg hurts.

Leg hurts. Leg. Hurts.

Leg.

She’s used to it. She doesn’t complain about it. Sometimes she even makes jokes.

It still feels like someone is tightening a vice clamp around her knee, occasionally whacking her with something sharp just to make sure she’s paying attention.

It hurts.

Is the point.

She and Octavia are camped out in three-twelve, monitoring the police line. Monty sits over at the computer, still trying to track the people in the City of Light. Raven’s leg hurts, and Clarke’s mom is in Clarke’s apartment, reading through all the medical shit. Raven only saw her in passing, but she’s wary: two civilians is one more than she’d planned on and two more than she’s comfortable with. Wells has been sticking to Clarke’s apartment as well, though, playing chess with himself or whatever nerds do with their time while Raven’s leg hurts.

Her leg hurts, and she eats another oreo. Pops the top off, eats it, scrapes off the inside with her teeth. Then the bottom. It’s perfectly neat and doesn’t make crumbs.

Her leg hurts, and Octavia is saying “so I think we should have someone else keep tabs on the house, but from a distance,” when a phone rings. Raven’s leg hurts, and Octavia takes the device out of her pocket, looks at it, and smiles, holding it up to her ear. “Hey, Lincoln.”

The voice that comes out the other end— loud enough that Raven can hear it— is definitely not Lincoln’s. “Shadow,” it says. “Do you know where Skylark is?”

“Um,” Octavia says, “What?”

(Leg. Hurts.)

“This is the Commander. I was supposed to meet Clarke at three-thirty.” It’s three thirty-two, and Octavia looks at Raven, eyes wide, mouthing Clarke? “She’s never late, and her phone isn’t working, so either you know where she is or—”

Clarke is always annoyingly, disgustingly early.

“Python,” Raven says, just barely remembering to use his code name with Lexa listening.

“Working on it,” he says, spinning his chair from one computer to the other. He and Raven had
made sure they had easy access to the security systems from everyone’s workplace. The grainy footage of the ER comes up— and—

Raven’s leg hurts—

And the glass wall on the front of the hospital is smashed in.

“Holy shit,” Octavia says.

“What?”

“There… looks like something happened. At work. Rewind it,” Octavia orders, like Monty isn’t already doing that. And— just as they do, a Google alert pops up in the corner.

Because as Monty is watching the security footage, someone else is sharing it, and then Monty is swearing and Raven is swearing and Octavia looks between them and then starts spinning in circles because there’s nothing she can do to help but her desire to do so anyway is going to explode out at any moment and Raven’s leg hurts. She drops down at the other computer, switching out of Monty’s program and onto the internet. They’ve set up an algorithm to hack and delete all tweets and local news sites mentioning them, and if they do it fast enough—

“There’s a video online,” Octavia says and Raven’s leg hurts and right, Lexa’s listening. “We need to get it down, um, call you back.”

“Do you see her face in it?” Raven asks. “Because if you do then someone from this building will probably recognize her—”

“Deleting her employee records.” Monty’s clicking on the keyboard sounds more sure than she thinks he actually is right now. “You can’t see her face in the clip that’s going around but that doesn’t mean it’s not in the older footage—”

“Download it and then delete it all,” Octavia says. “I’ll get everyone else.”

“I could download it, we could go through it, try and figure out who got to her and who to follow, but that’d take hours, and in that time someone else could get to it and make more copies.”

Raven’s leg hurts, and she watches the clip, unable to help herself. Clarke, darting around, with her back to the camera but dropping something in her— “She destroyed her phone,” Raven says. “She made the same calculation and she chose to cover our asses. Delete it.” She doesn’t feel like the world is ending or anything dramatic like that, because her world had ended when Finn disappeared and her world had ended when the bullet hit her and her world had ended when Finn died and her leg hurts and compared to all that, this is small time. They’ll get Clarke back.

At the end of the video, Clarke is so heavy they have to haul her away with a backhoe.

That’s Clarke. Pain in the ass even when she’s unconscious.

The door opens and everyone comes in like a school fire drill: trying to be silent and organized, and failing. Connor, Harper and Miller all try and walk in at the same time, causing Connor to bounce off the doorframe. Bellamy and Monroe can’t seem to stop themselves from muttering at each other, not realizing or not caring that they’re talking over each other and everyone else, because Jasper is phoning in to say that he’ll be there in a few minutes and Connor is elbowing his way over to Monty to watch the footage and Octavia is slapping her hand against her thigh, over, and over, and over and over and Raven’s leg hurts. And then Wells and Abby are bringing up the rear, Wells still moving slowly and Abby with her mouth pressed thin and new wrinkles in her forehead.
“You don’t need to be here,” Raven tells her. She means it in a nice way— she’s going to be stressed, and whatever conversation they’re going to have is going to be upsetting. But it comes off rude and condescending, if Abby’s reaction is proportional: the wrinkles get deeper.

“Of course I need to be here,” she snaps back.

(Raven’s leg hurts.)

“I wasn’t trying to be an asshole. Sorry.”

Abby shakes her head and leans against the wall behind Raven, arms crossed. “This has— has this happened before? Is this a thing that happens?” she asks, voice pitched below Octavia and Bellamy’s attempts to ID the backhoe.

Raven doesn’t know which answer would be more comforting, but she only has the honest one. “This hasn’t happened before. I mean we’ve been in trouble, but not like this.” Not exactly like this, anyway. She has the urge to pat Abby on the hand or give her a hug or something, but it probably wouldn’t be appreciated. “We’ve been through worse, though. We’ll get her back.”

The minutes slip into an hour, then an hour and a half. Raven deletes tweets, deletes facebook comments, deletes blog posts. Her leg hurts. The voices in the background turn into a river—landscape-altering background noise—until—

“They’re stopping,” Bellamy says, before the nervous tension spills into a fight but later than anyone would have liked . He hunches forward over the back of the sofa, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Oh, Jesus. She’s stopped moving.”

“Do you need the map?” Monty asks, hands poised over the keyboard. There’s a program he’d made, specially designed to help Bellamy locate people— to track his impulses across imagined space.

“Don’t need it. I know where she is.” He looks up, slowly. Aged several years. “She’s at Mount Weather.”

And that means—

“They know where she came from,” Raven says.

And that means—

“They probably know who we are,” Connor says.

And that means—

“They know what we can do,” Bellamy adds.

And that means—

“This is a trap,” Jasper says.

And that means—
“We need to surprise them.” Octavia looks around, hesitating. “I’ll call the Commander back. Everyone get your masks.”

They put Lexa’s video feed up on Monty’s monitor, leaving Raven to keep managing social media. The Commander is wearing her mask, too. But now the drips going down the side of it just make her look like she’s crying.

She doesn’t sound like it, though. “Is this line secure?”

“Yes.” Monty leans into the frame. “Hello.”

Bellamy pushes him out of the way with the back of his hand. “We’ve located Skylark.” The words sound, coming from him— he’s trying and failing to sound like a professional. Clarke isn’t always good at sounding like a professional either, but she’s better than he is. “We think that the people who have her know what we can do. So, it’s probably a trap.”

“Great,” Lexa says. “I’ll send my people.”

Bellamy looks over at Raven, confusion evident even through his mask. “You’ll what?”

“They’re expecting you,” she says, as though he’s an idiot. “They’re not expecting us.”

“Great,” Bellamy says, mimicking her tone. “Meet us here and we’ll talk about it.”

She stares at him, and Raven pauses, watching the Commander’s face carefully. There’s nothing given away, but by the length of her silence, she must know what Bellamy can do. She must know what it would mean to be near him. To interact with him for any length of time.

(Raven’s leg hurts.)

And she can’t figure out what the game is. There’s something that Raven’s missing, because Lexa hasn’t asked for anything in return for her help. She’s just— offered. Which means that the benefits to the Coalition are already clear. So what are they?

“Fine,” the Commander says. “We’ll be there in an hour.”

Now Octavia is the one who elbows Bellamy out of the way. He stumbles to the side and bumps into Raven’s chair, making her roll into the desk. She shoves him back, and her leg hurts.

“Bring Lincoln,” Octavia says. Her arms are crossed, face set.

Lexa looks from Octavia to where Bellamy’s elbow is visible in the corner of the screen, and then back to Octavia. “One hour.”

And then she hangs up.

Maybe she just wanted the last word.

“Why the hell is she coming here?” Connor hisses.

“Safer than all of us going somewhere. There are five ways to kill her before she even hits the stairs, if she’s chipped.” Raven’s actually quite proud of the booby trapping. This building might
look ratty, but it’s held up by years of their paranoia and Raven’s genius.

“That’s why I asked her to bring Lincoln. We know he’s clean.” Octavia takes up her former position against the wall. If the Commander brings more than like, two people, they’re all going to get real friendly with each other real fast. Maybe they should bring in chairs from their own apartments.

“You think she could be chipped?” Abby asks. “Clarke is pretty sure she’s not.”

“Really sure,” Wells adds.

And Clarke got her ass kidnapped. “Clarke told Lexa her name,” Raven says. “And then she was attacked at work. Lexa didn’t even ask where we lived. Lexa volunteered to send people to help us without knowing anything.”

Her leg hurts.

“If Lexa’s City of Light and knows where Clarke lives, then why not grab her from here?” Harper has to stand on tip-toes to be seen over Miller’s shoulder. “The people who got her probably didn’t know, she uses the PO box for her work address, right?”

That’s where the trap part comes in. Raven shrugs. “I’m just saying, I don’t want to tell her anything until we’ve scanned her.”

“I still think we should leave,” Jasper says, and it takes a second for Raven to realize that that was the conversation that had been going on while she hadn’t been paying attention. “If they don’t already know where we live, they will soon.”

“There are five ways to kill someone before they hit the stairs, and like, ten if they try and come down the hall,” Raven says again. Some of them would even leave the other apartments intact.

“We can’t go anywhere for an hour anyway,” Bellamy says.

Raven’s leg hurts.

_____

Lexa isn’t chipped. She also doesn’t come in through the door. Instead, there’s a tap at the window. Monroe is the closest to it, and she waits until everyone else has their guns out before sliding it open. Lincoln swings in legs first, coming down from the roof in a trademark Sky Crew move. He makes a face at how crowded it is, then squeezes through them to go stand next to Octavia. Miller definitely checks out his ass.

Next through is the short black woman that Clarke had drawn a picture of, after the first meet-up. Indra. She looks at them like they’re all particularly annoying children. “Lower your guns.”

“She’s clear,” Monroe says.

Bellamy nods once. The guns go down.

Raven’s leg hurts.

Indra clicks twice on a button strapped to her wrist.
The next one in is the Commander herself. She’s taller than Indra, but shorter than Raven had expected. She carries herself as though she’s larger than life, moving through them with ease until she’s standing in front of Bellamy. She sizes him up for a second, and then nods, and Indra clicks her wrist thing twice more.

The last woman to come through towers over all of them.

She’s also another gimp.

There’s nothing in her face to show it, barely anything in her body language to give her away except that Raven’s leg hurts and Raven knows. The way she holds herself. The way she takes a step forward.

“This is Anya,” the Commander says. “You’ve met Indra and Lincoln.”

“Goggles.” Raven’s an asshole, and Raven doesn’t trust these people, and her leg hurts but she’s also got a bit of empathy, no matter how much she tries to squash it away. “Give Anya your chair.”

“I want a new code name,” Jasper says, but after a second he does stand up.

The Commander is staring at Raven. Raven stares back for a second, then at Anya.

Anya looks from her face to her leg brace and back to her face, and after a second, she nods at her and takes the seat.

“And you are?” Indra asks.

“Wire.”

“Ah.” Indra turns to the Commander. “The one who tried to blow up the Tond Circle leadership.”

Raven’s leg hurts. “They’d just had my oldest friend murdered,” she says, and the words are a wound self-inflicted. “I was having a bad day.”

“That wasn’t murder,” Indra informs her. “That was justice.”

Of course it was. Every form of justice had failed Finn in the past, why should it be any different at the end? Raven opens her mouth to retort—she doesn’t know what she’s going to say— but the Commander cuts her off. “If you’re done,” she says, but she’s looking at Indra and not at Raven.

Which is good, because if she had, Raven might have punched her in the face.

Her leg hurts.

There’s a hand on her shoulder, and she’s about to try and break it when she looks up and realizes it’s Abby. It’s hard to tell, through her cheap-ass mask, but the look on her face is—it’s not sympathy, Raven doesn’t think she can handle sympathy, but it’s sort of comforting and it sort of works.

It’s nice, anyway.

“Homer.” Lexa turns to Bellamy. “Where is Skylark?”

It’s not the way she had said it earlier. Now it’s authoritative, expecting an answer. Earlier had been—human? Scared?
Bellamy clears his throat.

“She’s at Mount Weather,” Homer says. And of course she is. It’s a poetic kind of loop that happens so rarely in reality. “And it could be a coincidence.”

But they all know better.

There are better places near the city to hold someone. Places with less history and government involvement.

“That does sound like a trap,” she agrees. Clarke had never spoken to her about Mount Weather. But Lexa can’t help herself, she imagines being back at the army hospital, and that must have been better than Clarke’s experience by far and if Lexa had to go back she’d— she’d—

She doesn’t know what she’d do. She’s never made herself think about it.

They have to get Clarke out.

“You guys escaped there before,” says the woman standing behind Wire. She’s got a crude mask stuck to her face— the kind you can get for a dollar in October. Not a member of the team. Looks like terror and grief is going to crush her if she moves, but she’s putting a strong face on it. Likely the person who Clarke had brought in to look at the files.

Likely Clarke’s mother, Dr. Abigail Griffin.

Yeah, Lexa had checked into her records.

“Fox died and Wire’s leg never got better,” says the one with the braids. By process of elimination, Lexa is reasonably sure this one is the one they call Gunner. Like Goggles, they may have run out of name ideas. “And they may know how we got out.”

“Through the parking garage tunnel,” Homer says. “There was a service corridor. And I think we may have blown that up.”

“You didn’t.” Anya has pulled her tablet out of her coat and is swiping through something— blueprints. “We went in there after you guys left.”

Homer tries to straighten up even more than he already has. He’s scared, too, but he’s not letting himself be intimidated and Lexa considers respecting him for it. “You what?”

“We made sure that no evidence remained before the army got there,” Lexa explains. It had been a tight window— she hadn’t gone herself, but she’d been watching over body cameras, because human experimentation hits close to home, because she needed to know that Becca hadn’t been lying to her about ending the trials, because she needed to make sure that it had all stopped.

“And did you find any?” Dr. Griffin asks.

If they had, she wouldn’t tell them. “You were very thorough,” Lexa says. “Meaning that the best way for someone to restart Wallace’s work would be to get their hands on his live samples.”
“We are not samples,” Homer spits. Lexa ignores him, because there’s more at stake here than him, more at stake here than Clarke. Who she shouldn’t be so worried about. Clarke has survived a lot and she and Lexa aren’t even friends.

Even if she did spend an entire ten minutes trying to remember the name of that Pokemon to send her. In the end, she’d had to ask Aden.

“If they want Sky Crew alive and in Mount Weather,” Indra says, picking up where Lexa had paused, “then it seems stupid to give them exactly that. They could make their mind controlled army a mind controlled army with, what, super strength? Healing?”

“Eclectic and improbable specialized powers?” Offers Goggles.

“You can’t be suggesting we stay behind.” Homer’s got his fists clenched, and Lexa is pretty sure she could take him in a fight, but she doesn’t want to have to. Clarke would probably be mad. All the personalities in this room are bouncing off each other, suffocating— Sky Crew is crammed together, spilling over a sofa like it’s movie night, and Lexa had always thought of them as kids but they aren’t really, are they.

“Well even if they stay behind, they can’t stay here,” Anya says. “The longer Skylark’s there, the more likely it is that she gives you up.”

The glare Wire turns on her is deadly.

“All due respect,” says the second white girl. Siren. “But you don’t know her. She would never.”

Indra shifts her weight from one foot to the other. It’s something she does when she wants to look less threatening. It’s rare, and doesn’t work. “You don’t know what people will do.”

“We do,” Homer says. “We were stuck in that hellhole with her for years. You think they didn’t try and torture us?”

Dr. Griffin puts a hand to her mouth. Homer doesn’t notice. He’s full of righteous fury.

“There’s nothing that they could do to her that would make her give us up. Or take a chip.”

“Or that they could do to us that would make her take a chip,” says Goggles, and he’s leaning away from the others as he said it, an old scab in his voice. Lexa wonders who Clarke let die to keep their secrets.

“It’s moot anyway,” Homer says. “We’re going.”

Indra throws her hands in the air. She probably wants to be clawing Homer’s face off. “They’ll expect it.”

“So let’s do what they expect.” One of the other boys steps forward. He’s wearing a beanie. Turret, then, the one that Aden is such a fan of. “The last time we thought Skylark got in trouble, one of us shot a bunch of civilians.” Indra tenses. “They don’t expect us to be rational.”

“One of us shot a bunch of civilians,” Goggles stresses, the scabs in his voice starting to bleed. “And his motivations were pretty clear. I don’t think they’ll believe we’re all sleeping with Skylark.”

“Watch it,” Wire snaps. Homer had just inhaled like he was going to let loose as well. To her horror, Lexa realizes she understands the instinct.
That could be a problem.

“So we storm the front.” Snap reaches for Anya, hesitates, then drops his arm. “Can I see the blueprint?”

Anya looks at Lexa, who nods. Snap takes the tablet gingerly, before zooming in. There’s no way they can all see it, so the rising action takes a pause while he hooks it up to one of the computer monitors.

“This hall here, behind the front door, it bottlenecked really easily, remember? So if we get enough of us at the front door, we lure the guards out here. Especially if we have a bunch of you guys to back us up, make us look bigger. Then Shadow can take them out from behind, trapping them, while Homer goes through the side entrance to get Skylark.”

“I should go with him,” Turret says. “See if anyone’s coming.”

“No, they’ll need you at the front. You say it bottlenecked, but there are still three alcoves they could take cover in.” Lexa points. ”X-ray vision, right?”

"And infrared."

"Turret!"

Turret turns to scowl at Gunner. "What? If we're working with these guys, they might as well know."

“If we get close enough we can get into the security cameras,” Wire says. "I’ll be in the truck, watch where Homer’s going.”

Homer shakes his head. “No.”

“What?” Wire tenses like she’s going to stand up. “The fuck, Homer?”

“You’re not coming.”

Lexa realizes, all of a sudden, that those two have slept together. These relationships get more and more messy.

“You can’t just sideline me,” Wire splutters.

“I’m not sidelining you. But if we’re going to leave this area completely undefended, then we need to get all the Tsing files out of here. And if we all die, or get caught, then you have to be there to blow them up.”

If they all die they’re going to need those files more than ever. Well. Someone is.

“I’ve only been looking at them for a few hours,” Dr. Griffin says. “They’re far beyond current science. Destroying them might be destroying the chance for those of us without powers—” her mouth twists oddly around the word— “to stop ALIE. And— um, Skylark told me to let her die over losing any advantage. And that she’d let me die.”

Lexa had always thought that she was the ruthless one. But of course Skylark must be. For all her talk of saving the neighborhood, lack of killing and belief in civic duty, she’s still the woman who set fire to her torturers and killed the boy who loved her. Clarke has got scars in places Lexa will never find. She needs to remember that.
“One of us needs to be with them at all times anyway,” Homer says. “Python can run the cams.”

“If too many of you are missing, they’ll be less likely to fall for your trap.” Lexa says it because it’s true. She also says it to see how he’ll react. The logical solution would be to let one of Lexa’s people run the cameras, but Sky Crew is still too secretive to let someone else watch all of them in action at the same time.

“I’ll do it,” says the boy Lexa had identified as Wells Jaha upon entering and then discounted. She turns to him now. He hasn’t bothered with a mask, and he’s twisting his hands around in the pocket of his hoodie.

“No offense,” says Wire, with the tone of one who is about to offend, “but—”

“I’m really good at clock simul,” he says. “Playing several chess games at once. Same principle.”

“Different execution. This isn’t chess.”

“No offense,” says Jaha, with the tone of one who genuinely doesn’t want to offend, “but it kind of is.”

There is a crack in the sky.

No— the ceiling. And it’s not a crack, it’s a long scorch mark on grey cement. Clarke tries to rub her eye, but her hands won’t move— they’re shackled to the floor. Everything is heavy, and it takes a second to realize that that’s because she made it so. She has to let go of the ground in order to sit up.

“Hello, Princess,” says a voice she had thought long gone. She turns, slowly. Across from her, similarly shackled, hair long, with a bruise attempting to fade and a beard desperately attempting to grow, is John Murphy. “Welcome back to Hell.”

Chapter End Notes

I had a dream the other night that I was posting on facebook about how it was Lexa’s six month deathiversary. Dream me is still angry. Awake me is still angry, too. Anyway, I failed to get this chapter out by the third, but since nobody knew that was my goal, nobody noticed. Don’t tell.
What Murphy doesn’t know is that Clarke saw him leave.

It was two days after Finn died. She’d been patrolling the streets, pulling her punches because Sky Crew had to seem safe and friendly, and because every time she hit someone she saw Finn standing over their shoulder. Watching her with dead eyes. The worst part was that he never spoke: in real life, Finn could never shut the fuck up.

So she’d stayed out later than she had to, circling the block around the Dropship building nearly a dozen times. Finally rounded the corner to see Murphy walking out the front door, a backpack over his shoulder. He hadn’t looked around. Just walked like he was on a time limit, across the street and behind the gas station and she hadn’t seen him since.

What Murphy probably does know is that Clarke was relieved.

He was good in a fight, if the fight was to the death. He was shit at teamwork, shit at responsibility, shit at anything that wasn’t directly in his own self interest.

And he hadn’t stopped Finn.

It wasn’t fair to think. But sometimes, when Clarke remembers Finn hitting the ground, paralyzed but alive, knowing she had betrayed him— sometimes she wishes Murphy had shot him as soon as Finn shot the first hostage. He wouldn’t have survived it— Murphy never shot to injure— but seventeen people would be alive. Clarke could have hated Murphy, instead of herself.

He would have died faster.

So Murphy had left, and she had been glad, but now he’s been locked up here and she had no idea so it’s another thing that’s going to fester, another thing that she should have been able to stop.

They should have had Monty check up on him occasionally. Make sure he was alright.

Doesn’t matter now, of course.

“How long have I been here?” Clarke asks, when she’s managed to pull herself into a sitting position. Their cell is bigger than anything she’s ever seen at Mount Weather— she and Murphy are chained catty-corner to each other, but the wall across from Clarke is at least fifteen feet and
the one across from Murphy is— forty? Fifty? And made of something different than the others.

“Bout twelve hours,” Murphy drawls. “Far’s I can tell. They brought you in on a fork lift.”

She doesn’t remember being awake for any of it. But she can still feel her buzzer pressed against her side. Her shirt had probably weighed too much for them to check it.

“How long have you been here?”

Murphy snorts. “Bout six weeks,” he says, dragging out the syllables even more. “Far’s I can tell.”

Six weeks.

He’s a piece of shit, but they shouldn’t have left him. “I’m—”

“Shut up,” he snaps, rolling his neck around to make eye contact. “I don’t want to hear anything you have to say.”

She’s about to retort with something equally antagonistic when he flicks his eyes to the ceiling. Someone’s listening to them.

“Fuck you,” she says, rolling her eyes to indicate that she understood. They’d had an entire code, back when they were stuck here together. Messages conveyed in tapping fingers and generic curse words. She’s rusty. She never thought she’d need it again.

Jesus, she’s back at Mount Weather. She’s back at Mount Weather.


They all died so she could fly. To have a meltdown would be a disgrace to their memories.

Okay.

She got out once. She can do it again. Bellamy will know where she is. If she can’t break out on her own, they’ll come and get her.

“So what’s going on in the world?” Murphy asks, after what might be an hour of pointed silence.

“I thought you didn’t want to talk to me.”

“I’m bored.”

Clarke snorts. She doesn’t actually remember what’s going on outside of Polis. The City of Light and the Coalition have taken up most of her time. “Lots of people want to be president,” she says, trying to remember who in fact is still in the running. Has anyone dropped out in the last six weeks? Maybe that one guy, or that other guy— she isn’t sure. “Um, Jay Z cheated on Beyonce. She wrote an album about it.”

“Who the fuck is Jay Z?”

“Rapper?” who the fuck even is Jay Z. It takes a while for her to remember. “Um, 99 Problems.” No recognition. She tries again. “He’s the guy whose song was on in ‘Party in the USA’.”
“Oh!” Murphy’s eyes light up. “That guy. Old llama’s got a crazy girlfriend, huh?”

She’s about to defend Beyonce’s honor when she remembers. The llama. That had been their name for Carl Emerson, because of some—what was it, a meme? A video? Something with llamas. 

Caaaaaaaarrrrrlllll.

Llama’s got a crazy girlfriend.

Emerson is City of Light.

Of course he is. Of fucking course. They’d been too all over the place after Finn died to follow up properly, and he’d vanished. She’d assumed that he’d climbed back into whatever slime pit people like him went to when their plans had been foiled, but of course he hadn’t, because he’s like Murphy. Cockroaches, both of them. And he knows all their names, and he knows all their faces, and he knows all their powers and he has the vendetta to go with it.

She should have figured this out already. And it’s not just her that’s exposed, it’s all of them, she has to warn them—

She has to make it seem like she hasn’t learned anything.

“You’re an ass,” is what she comes up with, again flicking her eyes up to indicate that she’s understood.

But she can’t have been the only one to go near a chipped person. So maybe he’s just an ally, but hasn’t uploaded his brain. Or—

Or maybe the others have been captured too. Maybe he Godfathered them all at the same time. Maybe Bellamy won’t come get her because he’s already here.

Except their hall in the Dropship is like a fortress. And they hadn’t all been out today. Yesterday? There’s no way they’re all here, but they should be running, she has to get out and warn them. She has to—

Pee.

She has to pee.

“When do they give us bathroom breaks?”

“Whenever they feel like it. Why, do you have a plan?”

What? “What?” The hell?

“Well, needing to go to the bathroom seems like how you start making a plan.” Her plan, currently, is to come up with a plan and also go to the bathroom before she pees herself.

“Why do I have to have a plan? You’re the one that’s been here for weeks,” Clarke complains. Murphy is right, and isn’t that one for the record books: if they come up with a fake plan, it will distract whoever’s listening. “How did they get you, anyway? I thought you went to Vegas.” They could wait for Bellamy, but waiting for Bellamy isn’t a plan. But she doesn’t have anything else, and she won’t until she can see where in the building they are (loading dock? Murphy said they brought her in on a fork lift. That would put them on the first floor, with only one wall between them and the outside. One wall that they’re chained up far away from, which could have any number of guards or booby traps) and who is there (Emerson?) and what they want.
“I did go to Vegas.” Murphy slumps a little more dramatically against the wall. “Stayed there for a few hours until Bellamy lost track of me, then I took a bus to Reno. Had a great set-up going there, too.”

“Yeah?” It takes weeks for Bellamy to lose track of someone, but they must not know that. Murphy could have turned them all in ages ago— he knows where they live. But he hadn’t. Why?

“Yeah, hooked up with this chick, she’d lure guys in, pretend to be a hooker, and then I’d steal their cash when they had their pants down, she’d kick them in the nuts and then we’d make a run for it. Most guys would be embarrassed as fuck, not say anything. But, yanno. Enough went to the cops and eventually this beautiful face ended up on a mugshot. I got bailed out by some guy who told the cops he was my dad,” he spits at the last word, like the entire concept of a father is offensive. Even though his father had loved him. “I went along with it, figured he was a pimp or some shit, and I’d have to kill him when we got out, but it turns out he was a pod person. So now I’m here.”

“What do they want?”

Murphy shrugs. It’s pretty hard to shrug when one’s hands are locked to the floor, but he pulls it off. “Think they’re rebuilding all the data we destroyed. Blood tests. Seeing how fast I heal. The usual.” He’s only got a few fading bruises, but that doesn’t mean that there wasn’t worse only a day or two ago. Clarke feels bad, and then is annoyed at herself.

“Sorry,” she says anyway.

“Thought that they moved me in with you to demoralize you, but it just made me hope that your prince was going to come crashing through the wall at any moment. Then the twelve hour mark passed, and he didn’t, so you see why I’m hoping you have a plan.”

They probably moved him in with her to get them talking, see what she’d tell him. It might have worked, if Murphy hadn’t tipped her off. And if Murphy wasn’t such an asshole.

An asshole genius who apparently has these guys convinced that Bellamy is far weaker than he is. But then, Murphy’s always been smart when it comes to his own survival. Had he been waiting for one of them to get caught?

“Well, I’m more the self rescuing type,” she says. “I’m working on it.”

Had he turned her in?

Their code hadn’t had questions like that. She gets as close as she can— scrunching her eyebrows a bit (you) breathing out through her mouth (tell) eyes to the right (them) flicking the left corner of her mouth (what?)

He stares back at her. Doesn’t give any indication of understanding her, so she does it again. He taps his middle finger against the floor.

(Fuck off.)

Right.

You tell them where me?

Fuck off fuck off.
She hopes her scowl conveys exactly how she feels about this. She hopes it conveys the slow and painful death in the near future.

Also, she doesn’t feel bad for him anymore.

“I really do need to pee, though,” she adds, just to piss him off and for the benefit of whoever is listening.

“Well, they unlocked one of my hands and gave me a bottle,” Murphy says. “Guess that wouldn’t really work for you.”

Clarke groans and leans back against the wall.

Someone does come after a while. It’s the girl from the ER, the one who had been held hostage, the one who had made Clarke hesitate, the one who had cost Clarke her freedom. And that just confirms that there’s someone working behind the City of Light, because computer programs probably wouldn’t play mind games like this.

Computer programs play logical games. Like chess.

She misses Wells, all of a sudden, in a way more specific than her general missing of things like mobility and toilets and the sky. She hopes he’s okay. She hopes that Sky Crew has left the apartment building (and gone— where? It would be best for them if they left town, but it’s unlikely) and that he isn’t too freaked out by this whole thing.

(She’s been here maybe a day. It’s too soon for her to miss anything.)

Caught up in bitterness, it takes Clarke a second to realize that the girl is carrying two bowls. She places one on the concrete between Clarke’s knees.

It’s some sort of broth. It’s probably poison.

Or drugged. Or something.

It’s only been a day. She can go longer without eating.

“Your mom know what you’re up to?” Clarke asks the girl. “You’re welcome for not letting you die, by the way.”

“My mother understands the importance of our future,” the girl says, with the tone of someone who drinks the kool-aid every lunchtime. She deposits Murphy’s bowl in an identical fashion to Clarke’s, and then drifts towards the door.

“Yo, you going to let us eat this?” Murphy barks at her. She stops to stare at him vacantly for a second before leaving, and Clarke is wondering if this is some sort of psychological torture before she comes back holding… two straws.
“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she says. The girl takes advantage of her speaking in order to shove the hot pink straw into her mouth. Murphy gets a green straw. She wonders if this is sexism. “I shtill hafta pee!” she shouts at the girl’s retreating back, trying desperately not to drop the straw from her mouth. To get it back would require licking the floor.

“Nithe,” Murphy says. He leans over and starts slurping it down.

Clarke raises an eyebrow. “Drugth?”

A pause, and the sucking sound of the last bits of something going up a straw as Murphy raises his head. “Your gueth ith ath good ath mine. Buth I’m futhing hungry.” He returns to his broth.

Clarke waits.

She’s not that hungry.

She’d eaten—what had she eaten? If it’s the last real food she ever has, she should remember. Coffee, definitely. A granola bar, maybe. Hard boiled egg, probably—she keeps at least a dozen in the fridge at any given time, for when she’s in a hurry. And she’d been in a hurry, because she’d slept a little late, because she’d stayed up drinking with Wells and had texted Lexa that stupid fucking picture, and Lexa had sent one back—

She hopes someone tells Lexa what’s happened. The Commander is smart, she’ll figure out that ALIE is a step ahead of where they thought it was, she’ll be able to regroup accordingly. Hopefully she’s gotten in contact with Sky Crew already. Gotten a buzzer.

If she doesn’t stop wondering what’s happening, if she doesn’t stop going through every scenario she can think of, if she doesn’t stop imagining the others kidnapped or killed, Bellamy being ambushed at his security job or grenades in Monty’s window or a bullet through Lexa’s neck where she’d been waiting at the music festival for Clarke—

Hell, maybe she should hope the broth is drugged.

It doesn’t seem to be, though. At least, Murphy has finished his, and he hasn’t thrown up or passed out or started telling her all his secrets. And it could be slow acting, but the longer she waits to decide, the longer she has to sit with this straw in her mouth. And who knows when they’ll be fed again.

Sighing, she hunches over. Her hair falls down on either side of her face, just barely clearing the top of the bowl. It requires a good bit of contortion, and her back hurts, and maybe this was the point. They could have gotten longer straws.

The image of Emerson purchasing jumbo straws at CVS is kind of funny.

Probably ALIE just had a minion who worked at a drugstore.

There’s got to be a way she can get out of here. If her hands were locked to the wall, then she’d be able to drag the shackles down via gravity, getting lighter and heavier until they fell. If they knew that she knew that they were being watched, maybe she could taunt someone into coming in here.

If they would let her fucking go to the bathroom. Well. Then she’d be able to think better.

Because the pee situation is getting dire.

She could just go in her pants. Get it over with. But if they won’t let her use her hands to eat then
they definitely won’t let her change her clothes. She can’t let them let her, lest they see the device taped to her side.

If she were Raven or Monty, she would know how to use that to get a signal to the others. But she doesn’t.

And it’s not like they won’t know where she is by now, anyway.

Unless Bellamy is dead.

But Bellamy probably isn’t dead.

They’re all probably fine.

The door opens, and Clarke spits the straw out expectantly. The woman who comes in is wearing blue hospital scrubs, with an ID badge clipped to the pocket.

Nina from triage. Behind her, the girl from the ER enters as well. She’s holding a gun.

“You’re really piling it on, ALIE,” Clarke says.

“My name is Nina.” The nurse kneels and begins unlocking Clarke’s hands. “Any sudden movements and he gets his balls shot off.”

That wouldn’t be such a great loss, Clarke wants to say, but then they might actually do it and if they’re going to get out of here she’s going to need Murphy to be able to run. He’s an asshole, and he probably turned her in, but it’s not like she can leave him here. He’s one of the hundred.

“Can I pee now?”

She’s jerked to her feet.

Hopefully that’s a yes, and they’re taking her to a toilet, not to the lab because she’s going to lose her shit if they take her to the lab, she’s going to lose it and any second she’s going to wake up in her bed at the Dropship building and this is going to be some horrible nightmare, but what if the Dropship building was the horrible nightmare? She’s back at Mount Weather and this cannot be real— But she owes it to them, to Abe and Atom and Billy and Daniel, Abe Atom Billy Daniel Ellie Maya Miles Naomi Rita Sam Tristan Will, Abe Atom Billy Daniel Ellie Maya Miles Naomi Rita Sam Tristan Will, Abe—

Nina marches her out into the hall. Narrow, cinderblocks, no (Abe, Atom,) windows. They make a left, they make a right, (Billy, Daniel,) another left (Ellie, Maya, Miles) and then another left (Naomi, Rita,) and then a right (Sam, Tristan,) and a left (Will) and down some stairs (Abe, Atom,) and she thinks they’re just fucking with her but then the girl darts ahead of Nina and opens a door into a bathroom just before Clarke is going to start having to do the bathroom-emergency shuffle-squat walk.

(Billy, Daniel, Ellie, Maya…)

“Pee,” Nina orders.

“Are you going to let go of my hands, or—”

She gets one hand free to tug down her pants and drop down on the toilet before it all starts coming out, and for a moment it’s such a relief that she doesn’t realize that the sound isn’t echoing right. At
first she thinks it’s because of stress, and that some of it is suddenly anti-gravity, bouncing around her thighs until it gets enough momentum to break free— this has happened before, and it’s always disgusting— but it’s not.

Clarke leans forward just a bit. Yep. There’s a cup about halfway down. They’re collecting her pee.

Of course they are. They’re trying to recreate lost data, Murphy had said.

She should have just gone in her pants. But it’s too late now.

It’s fine. It’s not a big deal. They probably can’t learn much from her pee. But they’re probably going to take blood samples later, then: she can almost see them, the bruises that had been in her elbows throughout her time at Mount Weather, because they’d never bothered to be particularly careful. And she’s never been sure if she should fight them when they did that— she did at first, just to be contrary, then when she figured out what they were doing to them, but there’s only so much she could fight the smaller battles until she’d shut herself off to everything but the big picture: get out and bring as many of the hundred as she can. So if they wanted to take blood, they could have it, and if she could she’d slip away a couple spare needles. If they found stolen needles on Connor and wanted to know what was happening, well, they could hurt her, but it wouldn’t matter. If they were going to cut Maya open in front of her and all she had to do was tell them how they were communicating even when she’d been dragged off to solitary, then, they could cut open Maya, let her bleed all over Clarke’s hands as she screamed at them to stop because she couldn’t save Maya at the expense of the rest of them, couldn’t save herself—

Abe Atom Billy Daniel Ellie Maya Miles Naomi Rita Sam Tristan Will—

Abe Atom Billy Daniel Ellie Maya Miles Naomi Rita Sam Tristan Will

Abe Atom Billy Daniel—!

There’s a sharp pinch in her arm (Ellie! Maya! Miles!) and it turns out that they are taking blood, while she’s sitting here on the toilet (Miles Naomi Rita Sam Tristan Will—) and she hadn’t noticed but that’s fine, that’s fine, she can’t stop them, better to let them do what they want so that she can go back to her cell, tell Jasper and Octavia what had happened to Maya in person, if they hear it from her then they’ll get it all out, and that’s safer than if they hear it from Cage or Emerson or Lovejoy. They would go for maximum impact and maximum reaction and maximum reaction means pain, means being dragged off and they can’t risk that, not when Finn’s got his girlfriend on a hidden radio and—

“Clarke Griffin.”

And Maya and Finn have been dead for a long time because it’s May of 2016 and she’s not in the lab, she’s on the toilet, and Emerson is standing at the door to the tiny bathroom, which now has four people in it. It’s 2016, and the only person here she has to protect is Murphy, and they can’t hurt Murphy, not for long.

“Carl Emerson,” Clarke says, trying to take a deep breath without making it obvious she’s doing so. She digs her free hand into her leg. Abe, Atom, Billy, Daniel, Ellie. May 2016. “Mount Weather Security Detail.”

“Not anymore.”

Can she at least pull her pants up? Or is this planned, this is a power play, this is some
psychological bullshit.

“Not anymore,” she agrees.

Emerson is slightly balder than he was the last time she’d seen him, his weird tufty hair falling out. The wrinkles are deeper over his eyes. He still has a face that he can arrange into a sympathetic shape, but it doesn’t look like he’s done so for a long time.

She still wants to kill him with her bare hands.

“Get her pants on,” he snaps at Nina. “And lock up her other hand, for fuck’s sake. I was very specific.”

Huh. “Haven’t joined the pod people yet, Carl?” Clarke asks, trying to keep her dignity while Nina wrenches her up and ER girl pulls her pants up for her, and no one has given her any toilet paper. “Thought you’d be all up in that shit, blindly following orders.”

He hits her. It isn’t as much a surprise as his continued free will had been.

Hurts more, though.

But if he’s not chipped then that means they only have his descriptions, and maybe some pictures. It means they don’t have the others’ faces paired with their names in their collective memory. It means that Murphy had told them where she worked.

“I’ve thought about this a lot,” he says, and Clarke can only assume he means ‘I’ve practiced this speech in the mirror a lot.’ “You took away everything I cared about. You destroyed everything we worked for. You ruined my life.”

It’s not like mine has been a lot better since our meeting, Clarke wants to say, but doesn’t. It’s not particularly fun, being hit.

Abe, Atom, Billy, Daniel, Ellie, Maya, Miles, Naomi, Rita, Sam, Tristan, Will.

“And you, you got to run off and build a life. You got protected. No one knew your name. You get to do whatever you want in the dark, and then brush it off in the morning and pretend you’re an ER clerk, pretend you’re helping people. You get no consequences.”

She gets Carl Emerson standing over her in a shitty bathroom with two pod people pressed against the sink. She gets a tiny apartment and fear and dead friends and a dead boyfriend. But she does get to help people, she gets to see the Commander make stupid jokes, she gets to see Raven smile when something finally works and she gets to see Harper laugh and it’s satisfying, knowing that Carl Emerson has so little that he had to try and tear his past out of her future.

It’s also terrifying, knowing that he has nothing to lose.

But she’ll take what she can get.

She doesn’t want to die.

“So kill me,” Clarke says. “You’ve thought about it.”

“That’s not the deal.”

“So what’s the deal?”
She’s been watching his hands since he came into the room— they’ve both been behind his back, which is why she doesn’t fight when Nina locks her hands back together, because ER girl has a gun, because Emerson might have a gun. Emerson might have two guns.

“The deal,” Emerson says slowly. And then he moves. Two steps forward and he’s got one hand firmly on the back of her head, squeezing in her hair. In hand number two is a soldering iron. He flicks it on with his thumb, a motion Clarke has seen Raven do about a thousand times, except when Raven does it it’s on a wire stand and she’s wearing goggles and it’s not aimed at Clarke’s face. She can feel the heat as it starts to warm up. “The deal is you don’t get to hide.”

Abe Atom Billy Daniel Ellie Maya Miles Naomi Rita Sam Tristan Will

Abe Atom Billy Daniel Ellie Maya Miles Naomi Rita Sam Tristan Will

Abe Atom Billy Daniel Ellie Maya Miles Naomi Rita Sam Tristan Will

ABEATOMBILLYDANIELLELLIEMAYAMILESNAOAMIRITASAMTRISTANWILL—

Chapter End Notes

On a lighter note, I spent a good five minutes sitting in my room trying to talk with a straw in my mouth to figure out what it sounds like.
Chapter Summary

He doesn’t have anything to pack.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s not that Wells is conflict averse, exactly. He just prefers conflicts he thinks he can win.

Looking at the Commander in her battle mask, Monroe fiddling with a knife, Indra holding still in perfect tension—

“We need to get as many in one place as possible before we can send in any stealth teams,” Anya is saying. “The stealth team can’t even kill a guard quietly, or they’ll know there’s someone loose in the building.”

Kill a guard.

“So we trap them,” Lexa says. “Get as many as possible in the hallway here, then send a couple people around back to keep them in. There’s a control room listed on the blueprints—”

Kill a guard.

“Surveillance is there, it’s decked out in computer monitors,” Raven says. “We’ll need to control that room before we can try and be sneaky as well, or they’ll see us.”

Kill a guard. Wells takes a deep breath. He doesn’t know if the Coalition guys would kill him for speaking up, but he doesn’t think Sky Crew would let them. It’s so crowded in here, and Harper and Octavia are between him and the Commander—

“Excuse me,” he says, as forcefully as he can. Trying to come up with backup plans.

Anya ignores him. “Homer, how precise will you be once you’re closer?”

“Very.” Bellamy says.

“Excuse me.” Wells squeezes past Harper, his first line of defense.

The Commander looks up. She doesn’t look like she’s ever smiled in her life. “What?” It’s more of an order than a question.

“You can’t kill them.” There’s no telling where ALIE took his dad, but for all he knows— “The chipped people, they don’t have any control. It’s not their fault.” It’s hot in here. He can’t breathe. “There’s no point in killing them anyway, because they all know the same things.”

None of Sky Crew will look at him. The Commander and Indra won’t look away.

“Wells,” the Commander says. “They might be brain dead already.”
“They might not be.” They’re not gone. They’re just— programmed. People always wake up from programming. There’s always that moment at the end where they destroy the evil computer or the villain and everyone in thrall wakes up, puts down their weapons, looks at the sky shining bright on their faces, then hugs their families. Always. And Wells isn’t an idiot, he knows that life isn’t a movie, but if the City of Light is going to resemble bad scifi then it should at least have a bad scifi ending. Maybe without the black guys dying.

“He has a point,” Bellamy says. Possibly more to one-up the Commander than actual belief, but Wells will take what he can get. “Most of the time our tranq darts only leave them out for twenty minutes or so, but we have a few stronger ones. Have to use them sparingly—”

“We have some,” Anya says. She doesn’t so much tap on her tablet as jab it a few times before getting to whatever page she wanted. “We have about twelve cases.”

“Fine.” The Commander nods. “Shadow, once the fighting starts, you sneak off and crash their surveillance. Once you do that, you and Indra keep the fighting contained in the front hall.” She waits, clearly to see if someone is going to object to her bossing Sky Crew around. Nobody does. “Any moving team after that should have a mix of people, in case you have vulnerabilities they know about, or they have a way to neutralize your abilities.”

“We aren’t the fucking X-Men,” Jasper says. “There’s no mutant cure.”

The Commander doesn’t blink. But she doesn’t respond, either.

“What he means,” Bellamy says, “is that I’ve got sensors in my nervous system and bit programs in my skull and that’s not taking into account the basic strength enhancements. That’s not something they can just wipe out with a drug.”

Indra doesn’t look impressed. “Could wipe it out with a bullet, though. Can’t find Skylark if you’re dead.”

If ALIE told his dad to shoot Wells, would he? Could he? Are there things that override computer systems or is he going to be done for? Because Wells doesn’t think he could shoot first, if he had to. Even if he had the chance. Even though he knows that his father, in his right mind, would rather he do it, rather he save himself—

He needs to stop thinking like this. His dad probably isn’t even going to be there.

The Commander clears her throat. “That’s why I’m going with Homer.”

“Excuse me,” Bellamy says.

Indra looks at the ceiling, as though it’s supposed to give her strength.

“Your chances of dying are decreased significantly if I’m with you,” the Commander says. No one doubts her. “And—if Skylark can’t walk out on her own, someone will need to provide defense. Also, if someone kills you, then it means there’s someone I can interrogate. I’m very hard to lie to.”

“They’ll be chipped,” Raven says. Wells hadn’t even noticed her tapping on the arm of her chair until she stops.

“They don’t have to answer me to tell me what they know.”

Before the Commander can get any more intimidating, Monty swears, ducking behind his
“Take it down!” Bellamy snaps.

“I’m working on it!”

“Fine. Everyone destroy what you can’t bring. We’re leaving in five minutes. Commander—”

“We regroup at the warehouse. Anya, you,” the Commander nods at Abby, although Wells has the feeling that she knows exactly who Abby is and her name and maybe even her life story, “meet up at a car around back.”

Anya pulls back. “Excuse me?”

Looks like Raven isn’t the only one being pushed to the side. Wells chews on the inside of his mouth, pretty sure that the Coalition people aren’t supposed to argue with the Commander.

“They’re going to need someone to guard them,” the Commander says. "They also don’t know where they’re going.”

There’s no emotion on Anya’s face anymore. “Right.”

“If we’re doing this over comms, trying to pretend you aren’t involved, y’all are going to need code names.” There’s a smirk dancing around Monroe’s mouth, even though the room is tense enough to burst. “You want to choose, or—?”

The Commander, for reasons unknown, decides her code name will be Susan.

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He doesn’t have anything to pack. The City of Light has probably gone through all the things he left behind at home, and Wells cringes, thinking of anonymous, programmed hands turning over his books— can a program judge him for his well-read copy of *Ender’s Game*?— or the quilt his mother had made him that he keeps carefully folded on his bed. His father’s chess set, with its smooth metal pieces: he used to roll the bishops between his thumbs when he was stressed, and he misses them. But that’s moot. He’s in Clarke’s room now, wondering what she would want. If she would be as disgusted at the idea of him going through her things as he is with ALIE. Clarke let him into her home: she didn’t give him an invite to go rooting through it.

But then she went and got kidnapped and now that home is compromised.

At least there aren’t family heirlooms, what with her incarceration and lack of contact. The thought is horrible, and he hates himself for considering it.

There’s no go-bag in the closet, just the emptied safe and some shoes on the floor. A mass of old shirts hang above them, and Wells knows a thrift shop raid when he sees one. Off to the side, like an afterthought, there’s a blue dress in a plastic garment bag.
When did she wear it? Does it mean something to her, to be wrapped like this?

It doesn’t matter. Maybe at some point she’ll be able to come back for it. Wells grabs a reusable shopping bag from the door handle and sticks in a couple of the shirts, the pants, clean underwear. Then he adds Clarke’s little travel chess set. They might get bored, wherever they end up hiding. At least it’s something he knows she’ll enjoy. The colored pencils from her night stand go in, too. And— and that’s something he can bring, something that she’s made for herself here.

There’s no way to bring all the art, but Wells returns to the living room and carefully starts working the long tree drawing off the command strip that keeps it fixed to the wall.

She might hate it. She might be back at Mount Weather now, looking at those very trees, she might hate the reminder when she comes home. Maybe he should bring something else. He’s about to try and stick it back up when Bellamy shuffles through the door.

It was stupid, for Wells to assume. Stupid to think that he, who has known Clarke only for days, is qualified to pick up behind her. But Bellamy just looks at him, the half removed drawing that is the evidence of his presumption, and nods.

“What’s in the bag?”


“Cool.”

It feels like he’s passed.

“I didn’t see a bag, or anything.”

“She doesn’t have one.” Bellamy gets the muffin tin of first aid supplies out of the cabinet. “She can’t float with a backpack on.”

Wells has seen her run. She wouldn’t need to fly. But maybe she thinks she’d have to hang back or run ahead, protect the rest of her people. It sounds like her.

“Of course,” is all he says. “The Commander get out okay?”

“Yeah. We have two minutes left. And hey.” He grabs Wells’s arm. “Listen. Don’t trust the Coalition guys, okay? You don’t owe them anything.”

This seems factually incorrect. “They’re helping us.”

“Yeah. But we don’t know why. Be careful.”

And he’s stepped out of line so many times, but are there lines here, really? They’re all fighting to survive, and if Wells can help— “I could be wrong,” he says, because Homer doesn’t seem like the type of person it’s healthy to argue with. “But you could consider— from the way they talked to each other, I got the sense that Clarke and the Commander might be, you know. Friends. Lexa might just want to come because she’s worried about her.”

Bellamy takes a step away from him, then around the apartment like Clarke is going to come out and give him answers. “The way they talk to each other?”

“They were sending each other jokes.” Memes? Wells isn’t sure of the correct terminology there, or what exactly that raccoon photo was supposed to be, but Clarke had almost fallen off her chair
laughing about it. “It just didn’t seem like Clarke was playing an angle. I mean, I don’t know. You
know her better. But if Lexa genuinely just wants to help her, and we assume that they’ve got some
ulterior motive, it could, you know. Fuck some shit up.”

“Huh.” Bellamy doesn’t tell Wells that he’s an idiot, which is nice. Wells needs to figure out the
rules of this place. “Shit’s already fucked though, man.” And then— “Be careful.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey, so this is short and I’ve been sitting on it for a month. I thought that the next part
was going to play into this. Updates should be more frequent now-- I’m trying to finish
this with NaNoWriMo goals. *knocks on wood*
Chapter Summary

“Your prince has come.”

Octavia doesn’t do traumatic flashbacks. She reaches through her memories, and she uses them to her advantage. Let the anger build, build, build until she’s invisible with it. She can use her memories to destroy them.

Memories like—Rotating turns in the light patch, passing around their one copy of *The Secret Garden*. Bright white lights on the way to the OR. Or: the halls past the old cells are darker than the halls in the science division.

Memories like—Running. Running. Escape: failed. Running the other way. Fire. Or: there are three viable routes to the control room from the first floor.

Memories like—the stairs echo, especially when a whole herd of guards is running down them, meaning that the distraction at the front is working. The lighting here leaves a dark shadow underneath the first set, and so Octavia waits, waits—

Waits to kill them all. Turn sharp cement edges into tombstones.

But she can’t. That isn’t her job. These aren’t even Mount Weather guards. They’re civilian suckers who thought there was a cure for pain. And if she kills one, all the others will know instantly. The entire plan will be blown.

Fucking hive mind.

So she lies in wait as they come thundering past— one, two, three, and as they go by she swipes the last one’s badge. They turn down past the cells that now sit empty, and Octavia goes up, taking the stairs three at a time. Making perhaps a little too much noise herself but she has to go fast so that her brother can find Clarke, so that they can get out—

And even before they turned her into this, Octavia was sneaky.

*Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows.* Oh, she knows. Abandonment, scorn, foster homes. Handcuffs around two kids caught stealing. Not a big crime, compared to what the rest of the Hundred had done, but enough to disappear kids who didn’t have parents looking for them, who are willing to drive from DC to Polis without much explanation.

Octavia doesn’t grudge Clarke that. It’s obvious that it’s tearing her apart. Bellamy and Octavia are lucky, really.

Really.

She reaches the third floor, and waits. Clicks twice on the comm button strapped to her palms (both palms, in case one hand is injured) to indicate where she is. Wells should be in the surveillance van, but he can only survey the outside cameras, the ones online. The rest is up to her. Make sure that Wells can find a clear path for Bell and the Commander, make sure that the hive doesn’t
figure out what they’re doing and move all efforts back to guarding Clarke.

There aren’t any sounds coming from the other side of the door, but it’s three inches of metal. So she beeps the guard’s card, and cracks it open.

The light is almost blinding. She wonders who pays the electric bills. But once she’s adjusted, there’s no one there. There are probably a couple around the corner, but they’ll hear her. So she flings herself through the door and sprints.

A guard comes to investigate. She shoots him in the neck, then drops down into a slide, because, yep, there’s a second guard, spraying the hall with bullets. Octavia gets him in the crack between pant and boot, yanking his leg out from under him for good measure, and he falls, bullets burying themselves in the ceiling.

No other guards appear. But now they know where she is. And whoever’s inside that room knows she’s coming. It was going to happen, though. She just has to go before anyone can get here. *Please,* she thinks, *please,* as she holds the guard’s badge up to the control room lock.

Red.

Shit.

There’s got to be someone in there, monitoring the attack, but they’d be stupid to open the door—

She grabs the badge from Machine Gun Guard, a man maybe in his seventies, face blank in unconsciousness.

Green.

She pushes the door open, standing out of the way. Inside, she can hear someone move.

Inside, the only light is from the monitors.

So Octavia kicks the door the rest of the way open, and drops into a somersault, rolling into the small office room. The woman inside has a gun pointed at the door—tranqs, unlike the guards outside. She fires one into the hallway—

Octavia shoots her in her unarmored stomach. Stands. Computer monitors— but where— there! She pulls the USB from her zipper pocket and jams it into the port.

And gives herself ten seconds to breathe, for the adrenaline to wear off, and she hates it but she craves this, doing a mission and doing it right. She’s better than all these mind controlled fuckers. She can be better than everyone, given enough time. There’s the satisfaction as the computer reads the drive, as the virus burrows itself into the system, and all the monitors freeze. Empty halls, a scrum of people at the main entrance. Connor, with his hand over a guard’s nose and mouth. Harper, her lips pursed into a whistle. Jasper, blood on his face. All that was seconds ago. Since then, everything’s changed.

Octavia clicks her comm again. “File delivered. Bishop, you online?”

“Got it,” Wells says. “Door locks online… now. Homer, Sue, you’re cleared for gamma entrance. Shadow, there’s a group of six headed to your position from the north stairs.” The ones she had just come from. “Knife is in pursuit, will meet with you shortly.”

Even with Indra on her way, Octavia expects at least five armed pod people. Instead, she takes
shelter behind the doorframe, and waits— waits—

Waits—

“Skylark?” Bellamy asks, and Octavia is glad no one is around to see her jump a little bit.

“I see her,” Wells says. Pauses. “The room isn’t labeled. There’s someone else in there with her. Looks like another prisoner, but I don’t know. Sue and Homer, you’ve got a straggler on the next hall.”

And she waits—

And then someone comes around the corner and Octavia reaches up to fire but it’s Indra, face covered with a mask but eyes unmistakable. “Are you coming?”

“I thought—” Octavia straightens. “Why didn’t you comm?”

“Too much chatter. We’re going back to the melee. Keep them from peeling off.” Indra jerks her head behind her and, not feeling quite as badass as she had a second ago, Octavia follows. One of the guards she’d tranqued before moves a little bit, and she considers shooting him again— but she’s only got so many darts, and it’s going to take him a couple hours to have full use of his limbs back. And more before he stops throwing up.

So it’s not worth it.

Unless he gets up and kills one of her friends— Bellamy—

He’s several feet behind them now but Octavia shoots him anyway.

Better safe.

She and Indra hit the stairs again, which are now decorated with six unconscious bodies. And what felt like a long perilous journey before is almost a letdown on the way back— two people are coming at them from the cell block, but they’re aiming at Indra in the shadowy hall. Octavia takes them both out.

“That was my cell,” she realizes, standing over their forms. “On the left.” She’d shared it with Clarke, Raven and Fox, at the end. After Roma and Maya— died.

Just died.

“Huh,” Indra says, a look of complete disinterest leaking out from behind her mask.

Past the cell blocks. Feet on cement. Years of her life, trapped in here, years of her life and she’s going to destroy it for real this time, until there’s nothing but dust left—

Around the corner and down the hall and Indra leaps in front of her, tackling a woman to the floor and it’s over before Octavia could blink and she’s always prided herself on being fast but Indra is faster and they run— and then there’s the scrum at the entrance, a cluster is breaking away and Monty is bounding after them— his gun is gone but he’s acquired a shirt and he wraps it around one man’s face, then an arm around his neck, and flings him into the others, knocking them down like bowling pins.

“Strike,” Octavia says, letting herself appear just long enough that one guard realizes their mistake when they get a dart in the arm. Indra shoots the rest. “The fuck’s your gun?” Knocking people
unconscious could give them lasting damage, and Wells had been pretty clear about lasting
damage.

Then again, they just picked Wells up a few days ago. Octavia might be more partial to him
because of her involvement in his rescue, but that doesn’t mean she’ll take instruction from him.

The Shadow doesn’t take orders from anyone.

Except Clarke. If Octavia already agrees with her. And right now she'll take orders from Indra,
when the older woman snaps for her to duck. Octavia does, and Indra executes a perfect
roundhouse kick over her head.

“Outta ammo,” Monty says, wielding his shirt to great effect.

“Knife, Python, Shadow— anyone leaves that hall, knock them out,” Wells says. “Sue, you got two
coming on the right. I’m unlocking the door on your left. Hide.”

The door to her left is a closet.

She doesn’t fully process this before she and Homer have flung themselves inside it.

And then she is stuck in a closet.

With Homer.

It’s not even a good hide-closet. There’s not space for both of them between the shelves and the
door, and Homer ends up squeezed under the bottom shelf, head between his arms, back probably
twisted to avoid the bucket that’s taking up at least twenty percent of the space.

Lexa, on the other hand, gets to half sit on the second shelf, with the corner of a wooden box
digging into her back even through her kevlar turtleneck, and a broom handle trying to give her a
colonoscopy.

The turtleneck is sweaty. As are the gloves, and the leggings. And her mask— not her normal one
— sits awkwardly on her face. But no one is seeing her bleed.

Don’t let them see you bleed.

Outside, ALIE’s people pass with the agility of drunk rhinos.

“You’re clear,” Wells says.

“Next time tell us when it’s a tiny fucking closet,” Homer hisses back. “Ow.”

“Ha,” says a voice on the comms Lexa can’t identify. “Seven minutes in Hell, Homer? Having
trouble coming out of the closet?”

“One to talk, Turret.”
Lexa takes back her earlier assessment. They’re all children. It takes her a second to find the doorknob, but then she takes a step towards freedom.

"What? No closets here. Yeah, you hear that, motherfuckers?" There’s a grunt, and what sounds like a snap.

"Turret, turn your damn mic off. Shadow, there’s some stragglers at cell block C."

Homer grunts as he rolls out from under the shelf. “Next closet, you’re doing that,” he says. "You’re shorter."

“Pff. Please.” Lexa hesitates a second, and then offers him a hand up. He takes it. She doesn’t tell him that if someone were to open the door and start shooting, Homer better hope Lexa takes the brunt of it.

What the hell was she thinking, running in here?

“Which way are we going?” she asks. “If something happens, I want an idea of where to go.”

Homer grunts again, and they keep moving down the hall. In her ear, Wells is sending Shadow and Indra after stray chipped drones—they need a better name for them—and she can only hope he’s as good at multitasking as he says he is.

“She’s ahead of us,” Homer says. “Close.”

Ahead of them, the hallway Ts. “She told me that you were able to tell exactly where she is.”

“Yeah, Clarke told you a lot, huh.”

Well she didn’t tell her that Homer was such a petty ass, but they’re all under a lot of stress right now. Lexa chooses the higher road.

“It’s easier if I know the area. Like, Shadow is halfway between the entrance and the cell block, just passing one of the bathrooms. But Clarke is somewhere I’ve never been. We can cut through the cafeteria.”

Homer holds up a hand, then points his thumb at the wall. “Behind there,” he whispers. He didn’t need to: ahead of them is a single door in a cement hallway, with four heavily armed guards. “You cool?”

Lexa nods, once. She’s got an explosive in her pocket, a set of lockpicks inside her coat. A gun. Some darts. “I’m cool.”
One of the unconscious guards has what at first glance looks like a belt made of keys. They look like the Olympic rings when Lexa picks them up—maybe twenty keys to a loop, five loops all linked together. Presumably, some of these keys will free Clarke. Probably, one of them opens the door.

They don’t have time to try a hundred keys, though.

That’s where one of Wire’s devices comes in.

They each have one of the small explosives, in case they got separated—Homer uses his, adhering it to the lock. The bang is smaller than Lexa anticipated, but when she kicks the door, it opens.

And there—

Clarke.

And the other guy. But Clarke—

Her face is covered in angry red burns. Very intentional looking lines: there’s a sharp angle next to her right eye, a curve above her eyebrow. Two lines going diagonally across the other cheek, and then two short ones again to the right of her jaw. They’re recent, too—swollen, but they haven’t turned white yet. Which means that there was an hour, at least, where they were dithering about, waiting in the warehouse, where they were waiting for Wire to have the road blocks ready or for her to make sure all the getaway drivers and snipers were clean, fuck, the time it took her to get to the Dropship building because Homer wouldn’t trust her not to talk to them in person, the fucking traffic—

Cut down on any of that—

But there’s no point in carrying on like an asshole. Not now. Homer has dropped to his knees next to her, looking at her hands, which are bolted to the floor. “Are you okay?” he asks.

“I’m fine,” says the boy. He does, in fact, look fine—hardly a mark on him, just a fading bruise, and Lexa wonders why he didn’t get tortured as well. But he doesn’t have the look of someone who was left alone—he’s tense and bitter and when they unchain him, Lexa isn’t quite sure what they will be letting loose.

“Shut up, Murphy.”

“I’m fine.” This time it’s Clarke who said it. Clarke who clearly isn’t fine. Her voice is off—trying not to move her face too much when she speaks. “The cameras—”

“Disabled,” Lexa says quickly. And Clarke looks at her, and Lexa is good at reading faces, but she doesn’t know what she’s looking at right now. Confusion, probably. Pain, definitely.

“B—Homer. Emerson’s here. You gotta go after him. Lose a fight, I don’t care, Murphy’s got him convinced that your powers only last twelve hours and we need to know where he’s going.”

“But—”

“He was here half an hour ago. He probably still is.” She’s desperate, and Lexa is half tempted to go after this Emerson (Carl Emerson, probably, Mount Weather security detail, referenced many times in the audio of the Tond Circle shooting) herself. But she doesn’t have Homer’s abilities.

“You gotta find him.”

Homer leans back. Looks at Lexa, then at Murphy, and clenches his jaw. It’s all very brooding, but
then he hits his comm button. “Bishop, looking for a specific guy.”

“Not chipped.” Clarke says.

“Not chipped. Um, white guy, forties, huge nose, tufty hair, super wrinkly forehead.”

Murphy grunts. “He’s probably in his man cave. In Tsing’s old office. There’s no cameras.”

Homer looks to Clarke, who nods. Then to Lexa, who he points at, opens his mouth like he’s going to say something, and then chooses the wiser option and just runs. And then it’s Lexa who’s dropping down next to Clarke, fumbling with the guard’s massive key rings. They’re there to fuck with any would be rescuers, she’s sure: there aren’t this many locks in the city, much less the building.

“Lexa?” Clarke asks. “What are you— what—”

“It’s Susan, until we get out of here.” Lexa tries to smile. Each of Clarke’s limbs is bolted down individually— probably four keys. Faster to try each key in four locks and then move on, instead of all the keys in one lock. It’ll be easier to have a system. Although maybe they should prioritize getting one of her hands free so that she can try the rest of the keys and Lexa can defend them when someone inevitably comes through the door.

“*This is Abe. There are three vans headed down the road, maybe seven people in each. Could be nothing, could be reinforcements.*”

Lexa drops the keys in favor of her comm button. “Take them out. If they start running—”

“Roger that,” Lincoln says, and then clicks out.

“*Is he using the Humvee Buster 9000?*” Python asks, way too excited for someone who’s supposed to be in a fight.

“You know,” Murphy drawls, and he has quite an annoying voice. “I know which keys are mine. You’d have me out of here real quick.”

Lexa ignores him, in favor of another key that doesn’t work on Clarke’s left hand, right hand, right foot, left—

“Come on, if someone comes in right now, what’s your plan?” and he makes a convincing argument, but Clarke and Homer don’t seem to trust him. But then Clarke nods.

“Are you sure?” Lexa asks, hesitant to move away.

“Yeah.”

So she half jogs the five steps across the room to where Murphy is. She’s half afraid he’s going to keep trying to banter, but he doesn’t. “Third key from the right on the fifth ring is my left hand,” he says. And how long was he here, for him to have picked up on that? They must have chained and unchained him dozens of times. That or he’s got a photographic memory. Once his hand is free, he takes the keys and frees the rest of his limbs while Lexa paces across the doorframe. There isn’t anyone there, even though she can hear Wells warning Homer of someone in near him, even though there’s the sounds of a fight still going on— they all have guns, sake, the front hall fight should have lasted minutes but maybe they all ran out of ammo quickly or maybe they’re all hopelessly inefficient.
Then again, Sky Crew has some level of super strength and endurance, and the City of Light doesn’t feel pain.

“Vans disabled,” Lincoln reports. “They’re taking guns and running down the highway.”

“Fire at will,” Lexa says, just for the formality of the thing.

“Excuse me?” Clarke asks. Lexa points to her ear.

“Lincoln’s got snipers in trees along the highway. Taking out ALIE’s backup. Python and Wire made something that fries their engines when they drive over it.”

Murphy stands with a groan. “We have snipers now?” he says to Clarke.

“I have snipers.” Lexa grabs the keys off the floor and kneels next to Clarke again. Really, she should be letting Murphy do this, she’s pretty sure she’s a better fighter than he is, but Clarke’s right here and alive and Lexa doesn’t want to be too far away.

It’s a problem.

She’ll deal with it later.

“Hurry up.”

“I’m trying, Bishop.”

Clarke mouths, Bishop?

“Well,” Lexa mutters back. It’s kind of crap on the code names if they just go around using the real ones.

“What the hell—?”

“Fill you in later.” On the third ring she finally gets one of Clarke’s feet free. A hand would have been more convenient, but beggars can’t be choosers. Grab key, try lock, try lock, try lock, try lock, repeat, and Lexa grits her teeth.

“Four reinforcements headed towards you, Sue”

“Shit, shit shit shit.” Clarke’s left hand. Which she uses to reach up and grab Lexa’s arm, digging her fingers in. “They’re coming towards us,” Lexa explains.

“Then run. Leave me the keys, I’ll figure it out.”

“Don’t be an idiot.” They’ve gone to all this trouble to find her. Key, try lock, try lock, try lock, try lock.

“I’ll run, if you don’t mind,” Murphy says, and Clarke skewers him with a glare. “Fine. Just thought I’d ask.”

“Feel free.” Key, lock, lock, lock, lock. “I’m the one with the voice in my ear telling me when I’m about to walk into an ambush.”

Clarke starts. “Lexa—”

Key, try lock— yes. The cuff on Clarke’s other foot pops open. Shoulda brought an extra comm,
really, in case they got separated. But instead she just has the lockpick kit, because they’d been anticipating one lock, maybe two, not four. When you assume…

Key, try lock, key, lock, key, lock. Click.

“Thank fuck,” Murphy says.

Lexa hauls Clarke to her feet. The other woman’s skin burns where she touches it.

“Bishop, get us a way out—” but there’s footsteps by the door and Clarke and Murphy aren’t protected. But Lexa is, Lexa has bulletproof clothing and fast-healing skin and dark clothes so they won’t see her bleed and she’s in the hallway before they can turn, plowing into the first woman while kicking the second’s gun out of his hand. And they’re wearing body armor too but there’s a crack between the woman’s sleeve and her glove and Lexa jams a needle into it, using her as a shield against the third guy. And number two has an arm around her neck and she headbutts him and her black blood sings because she hasn’t been in a real fight, not outnumbered like this, for so long. And she’s been coiled up, all day, while they were regrouping at the warehouse, making a plan, building the road block, scanning the snipers and here, here she gets to excel. So her foot goes into goon number four as she jabs a dart into the cheek of the guy holding her, twisting around to break his hold, and then they’re all four on the ground and she is standing victorious and they are not saved.

“Clear,” she says, turning. But instead of hiding behind the closed, bulletproof metal door, they both have their heads sticking through the gap, mouths hanging open.

She lets herself bask for a second.

But they are not saved. Clarke isn’t saved.

And there are more footsteps.

Lexa wants to fight. Lexa wants to fight and she doesn’t know if this is something that was done to her or who she is, but it’s been so long— and it doesn’t matter now because her job is to protect, her job is to save, to save Polis and Aden and herself and Clarke, Clarke—

“Run.”

They make it into the next hallway before Wells warns them that they’ll be surrounded if they turn the next corner. There’s only one door on this hall and he beeps it open for them and Lexa can only hope that it’s not a closet as they dart inside.

It’s not a closet.

It’s huge, in fact. Clean, in a way that none of the rest of the building is. An exam table, racks of medical equipment.

“Lock the door,” Lexa orders Wells, using the brief pause to check her gun. Ten darts left. Okay. She can do this. “You guys need weapons, we’re trying not to kill them, they don’t know what they’re doing, but save yourselves first.” And don’t tell Wells she said that.

Murphy bounds over to one of the cabinets and starts going through it with remarkable ability, flinging things over his shoulder as he discards them. Lexa had actually been thinking along the line of chair leg, but he seems to have a handle on it.

“Clarke—”
Clarke is frozen. Not frozen— melted, staring at the table. All her limbs have loosened, and she’s just barely mouthing something.

“Clarke,” Lexa says again, taking a step forward. Without looking at her, Clarke holds out her arm. And Lexa hadn’t freaked out when they came in here, she hadn’t freaked out when she and Homer had been stuck in a closet, she hadn’t freaked out when it was four on one but this— “Clarke,” she says again, a little more urgently, but it only seems to make Clarke withdraw further.

“Daniel Ellie Maya,” Clarke gasps.

Murphy pauses his flinging things about, and Lexa turns to see him winding a power cord around his arm.

“Who are they?” Lexa asks. “Daniel, Ellie, Maya.”

“Dead.”

Helpful.

“Clarke,” Lexa says again, a little desperate. “Clarke, it’s Lexa.” She reaches out to touch her, but she isn’t sure if you’re supposed to touch people who are in the middle of massive panic attacks, or mental breakdowns, or flashbacks or— or whatever’s happening. Still, she shoves her mask on top of her head, because fuck the guys trying to break the door down, they can wait a minute. “Skylark.”

That gets a bit of a blink, a bit of recognition. And of course. That came after this place. “Skylark,” Lexa says again. “Hey, look at me.”

“Will, Abe,” Clarke mutters, but she does turn her head, blinking a few more times. “Lexa—?”

Lexa tries to make her smile as unscary as possible. “Hey. You with us?”

She’s unprepared for Clarke hugging her. Clarke is clearly unprepared as well with the way she steps back after a few seconds, clearing her throat. “We need to—”

The door falls in. Lexa pulls her mask back over her face. Presses her thumb to the button her palm. “Gonna need some backup here, Bishop.”

“I’ve found Emerson,” Homer says. “Attacking now.”

“All city reinforcements down,” Lincoln throws in, and Lexa knows better than to turn the comm off but it’s a little distracting right now, punch, kick, shoot, try and stay in front of Clarke as much as she can, there’s one down, Murphy’s behind another with an extension cord around her neck and he’s probably going to kill her and Lexa can’t be fucked right now, because Clarke’s exposed and she’s fighting too, using a metal tray to block darts as she kicks out, but she’s exhausted, and Lexa’s exhausted, her hand is around someone’s helmet and she’s shoving them down, getting a dose in the back of their neck, and then there’s a knife digging into her jaw, just above her collar. Another arm across her chest and she wrenches his finger back— there’s a wedding ring on it, Jesus—and then there’s a gurgle as his neck snaps and his hand falls from her throat. Black glove covering the cut— she can’t drip blood, not here, not for them to find— Lexa turns. Clarke has the man’s head cradled in her hands, the line of his neck twisted.

Murphy grunts and bangs the last one on the head with a chair.

Silence. Sudden.
Clarke lowers the body to the floor.

He’s dead. There’s no question there. Because Clarke had—

“I’ve never done that before,” she says, almost dazed. “I was just trying to pull him away from you. Make him fall. I didn’t mean… Just my hand near his head snapped his neck back.”

“It’s okay,” Lexa says, even though she’s not sure if it’s okay. Clarke has killed people before. She knows this. But she doesn’t know if Clarke has killed people who were, for all intents and purposes, innocent. From the look on her face, Lexa thinks she has.

“Susan, are you guys okay?”

Lexa presses harder on her neck. “Yeah,” she manages. “We’re fine. What’s our status?”

“Homer’s faking a side injury and losing a fight, front entrance is mostly cleared out, Python has a broken arm, Shadow and Siren are on their way to Homer’s location to make sure that this dude doesn’t actually kill him, your closest exit is on the left. Area out there is covered by T-1 and T-2.”

Tris and Tom, respectively. She doesn’t recall which is which.

Clarke lets the body drop to the floor. It lands with a thud and a crunch.

“Let’s go,” Lexa says. She wants to reach out and touch her but she isn’t sure it would be welcome, not now. She checks the floor to make sure that her blood hasn’t dripped. But it seems clear, and the cut should be closed by now, turning into a scar that looks weeks old. She’ll just have to keep her hand there. Or hope no one notices. “Time to run again.”
The car has already peeled away from the building before Clarke realizes that Lexa hadn’t climbed in after her. The door had closed behind Murphy—

“Lexa?”

“Making sure everyone else gets out,” says the driver. Clarke doesn’t know him. Clarke is in a car being driven by someone she doesn’t know— but Monty is in the shotgun seat, taking the name literally, gun across his knees. His arm—

“Your arm,” she manages.

Monty waves it. Then yelps in pain. “Might be a little broken,” he says. “It’s fine.”

It’s a small car. Not a van. Right. The car, moving under them. Because this is a rescue. Clarke leans forward, trying as best she can to squeeze herself in between the seats. “Let me look.”

They’re driving very fast. The street lights on the highway are intermittent, but Clarke can see the shadows racing past outside the window. Trees? Crumbling buildings of the City of Light?

“Put on your seatbelt,” the driver says. The driver. Who is he? The driver—

“The driver,” she manages. Jesus, she has to get her shit together.

“This is Nyko.” Monty says it like it’s supposed to mean something. Or maybe it isn’t. Is he pronouncing Niko wrong on purpose? “He’s a doctor, he took care of my hand. It’s fine, Clarke.”

Right. But that’s her job. Has she been replaced?

“I’m really fine,” she says, even though no one has asked. “I could have done it.”

“It was before you got in here.”

Right.

Right.

She sits back. Padded seats instead of concrete walls, the smallest space she’s been in since the bathroom, when was that, two hours ago? Her face is stinging. That’s good. That’s a good time differential. Before Face, and After Face. Monty didn’t turn to look back at her. Is it because of her face?

What did Emerson do? It’s too dark to catch a glimpse in the rearview mirror. Emerson hadn’t wanted her to be able to hide, that’s what he said, and he’s right, she’s never going to be able to hide this. People are going to stare, for the rest of her life, and she—and she—

“Homer?” she manages. “Wells?” Homer Wells is a character from a book. How did she not think of that before? Homer Wells. The guy in the book was named after a cat, she thinks—it’s hard to remember. Someone else might remember. She’ll look it up later. There were apples, in the book. And a threesome. And a donkey?
“Everyone’s okay,” Monty says. “They’re all clearing out.”

Right. Clarke presses a thumb to her forehead, avoiding the burn up there. The numbers on the exits are going up— this isn’t the way back to Polis. But they can’t go back on the main route, because Raven barricaded it with broken cars, Lexa had told her that. Lexa had told her that before Clarke had a flashback in the OR and Christ, Lexa saw that, Murphy saw that, and— had she hugged Lexa?

She’s never going to be able to look her in the eye again.

And then Clarke had killed someone. She’s killed people before, but these ones were innocent. Somewhere under all that programming, they were innocent.

And blood— she needs to tell them about the blood—

Things aren’t lining up right in Clarke’s mind right now. They will, soon, she’s sure. She just has to… has to…

“Murphy,” Monty says. “Glad you’re alive, man.”

Murphy snorts. He’s a little out of it, too. The adrenaline is wearing off and this is a lot. This is a lot. “You’re the first.” And that’s not true. Clarke would just be happier if he was alive if he hadn’t sold her out.

She shouldn’t tell the others. She’d decided she wasn’t going to tell the others.

“Is there any chance you guys have food in here?” Murphy asks. “I haven’t had anything but broth in like, a month.”

Monty looks at Nyko, who grunts, “glove compartment.” A click as it opens, and then a Luna bar is thrown back towards them, followed by one of those fist-sized bottles of water.

“You carry snacks in your getaway cars?” Monty asks. There’s a grin tucked under the pain in his voice, and that’s good. Monty wouldn’t be making jokes if someone was dead.

“This is my car,” Nyko says.

Clarke grabs the Luna bar out of Murphy’s hand.

“Hey!”

“You haven’t had anything but broth in like, a month,” she reminds him. “You eat this you’re going to throw it up everywhere.” And she’s hungry. She’s so hungry, and she can eat solid food, and she’s so pissed at him. Even if his plan had worked or whatever. She’s never going to be able to go out in public again—

“Wow, and here I thought we had had our Pulp Fiction moment.”

Her neck almost hurts with how fast she turns to look at him. “John—”

“Not like that. Just, you know. With the mutual torture.”

The granola bar sticks for a second going down, and coughing stretches out her face, hurts more than she could have imagined, but she chooses to think it’s waking her up. “Jesus. Don’t joke.”

“Glad you care, Princess.”
God, it hurts. Maybe she should make like the Joker. *Do you know how I got these scars? It was a fight with a bear. A psycho with a soldering iron. A former teammate who sold me out so that my friends would come rescue me and pick him up along the way.*

(If she’d been in there, she would have done the same damn thing.)

“Well.” Another water bottle lands in Clarke’s lap, followed by a t-shirt. “It’s not burn cream or ice or anything. There only seem to be bandages in here. But—”

“Thanks, Monty.”

“We’re switching cars at a rest stop up here,” Nyko says. “That one should have more stuff in it.”

Clarke closes her eyes. She’s not going to sleep. But she can pretend to, if only so that they won’t keep sneaking glances at her. She wants a weapon.

The car bumbles along.

Her face hurts.

It’s quiet out there. Hard to believe that they were able to incapacitate all of ALIE and her reinforcements, that she didn’t send any from another direction, but then, how would she? They’re getting farther from Polis every minute, and this means that she hasn’t had a chance to spread to surrounding towns. That’s good. It’s a quarantine, of sorts.

If they killed everyone who had taken a chip, would ALIE be crippled? With nowhere to start again?

It’s the same principle as chemo. It’s the same principle as mass murder. As eugenics. Shit.

The car turns and Clarke jerks back upright as they swing into what could, generously, be called a rest stop, and less generously be called a little parking lot on the side of the road, with a single porta-potty under a street lamp. There’s a car waiting there, and Nyko seems to recognize it, because he has no problem parking and getting out.

“Does he have a sensor?” Clarke asks.

“Yeah.”

A woman gets out of the other car, another four-door sedan. A prick of cigarette light hangs between her fingertips—pretense for the stop. She and Nyko fist bump, and then Nyko waves the other three out of the car.

Hypothesis: Clarke can still move.

Testing theory: Clarke pulls the handle on the car door and stumbles out of it.

Hypothesis proven correct, but painful. She limps around to the back of the car, leaning on the trunk for a moment.

“Might want to step away from that,” Nyko says, waving the keys.

“What—”

She does step away from it, frowning at the trunk. The car beeps, like Nyko just remote locked the door, but instead of the thunk of the locks, panels pop out of the trunk, spin around, and then retract
until the surface is smooth again. The license plate slides up into the siding, and another drops down in its place.

Each panel has a weathered-looking bumpersticker on it, covering almost the entire back of the car. One says “EAT LOCAL.” Another, “I THINK, THEREFORE I’M VEGAN.” A third says “somewhere in Texas a village is missing an idiot,” which Clarke is pretty sure hasn't been relevant in eight years.

The new license plate says “LIVGREEN.”


Monty nods, approving. “Perfect cover.”

Nyko crosses his huge, muscley arms. “Who says it's a cover?”

“Um,” Monty says. “Er— for real?”

“You’ll never know. Careful with my car, Amika.”

“Yeah, yeah.” The woman climes into the veganmobile. “Get home safe.”

“She’ll drive behind us,” Nyko says, as they get into Amika’s deserted vehicle. “Let us know if she runs into anyone.”

“You could just use magnet bumperstickers.” Monty shakes his head again. “That’s so unnecessary. You gotta show it to Wire.”

The back seat of the new car is smaller than the old one, but there is the first aid kit under the seat. Clarke tears it open, going for the jar of Silvadene. It’s too dark to get much from the compact mirror also included, and she’s not letting Monty or Murphy near her face— instead she just does it by feel, dabbing huge drops on her finger. It hurts to much to rub it in, so she just leaves it in globs. Like frosting.

Some of it tries to drip down. She tilts her head back on the seat.

Still hurts.

The sun is coming up by the time they make it back to Polis, after turning around on the freeway twice, a bout of early commuter traffic, and miles of unkept arterial roads. But the city is where the real test is going to be— cameras, everywhere, ALIE, anywhere— and Murphy hunches down in his seat, trying to change his shape. Monty puts on a hat and feigns sleep against the window— or maybe he isn’t faking, there’s drool on his chin, Clarke can see it in the mirror— and Nyko has donned a pair of Clark Kent glasses.

Clarke’s neck is aching from being tilted back this whole time, but hey, it probably doesn’t hurt as bad as that guy’s did when she broke his—

Anyway. She maintains her pose.
At least they’ll be back soon.

The fuzziness from earlier has dissipated, coalescing into a ball of worry — they’re out of comm range, and no one has their phones. Which is a logical planning decision — what if someone dropped theirs — but seems less so now, when all Clarke wants is news.

The sky is bright by the time they pull into the parking garage of an apartment tower. They go down several levels, the constant turn of the car in the dark like they’re back on the off-ramps, but it’s quiet in here. So quiet.

“The Commander has set aside three apartments for you,” Nyko says. “You can split them up however you want, until you find somewhere else.”

“Apartments?” Clarke asks. She’d never really thought about where they were going — assumed it was to some Coalition headquarters or hospital, but — “Somewhere else?”

Monty turns to look at her. “The Dropship building was compromised.” And she shouldn’t be surprised, but —

“I never told them anything about that. Neither did Murphy.” Do they think she would have —?

“No, it wasn’t you. Some people figured out who you were from the security footage. I tried to pull it, but we don’t know who has it or who’s out there, so.”

So they left.

“Wells grabbed some of your stuff, though!” Monty added, in a forced cheery tone. “Come on.”

If Wells is back. If Wells is alive. If any of them are alive. But there’s another car pulling in behind them when they park, and Clarke wishes again for a weapon but it’s Bellamy who gets out first. Mask off, nose bloody, and she moves with more energy than she thought she had left, catching him in a hug.

He clings back.

“I’m so glad you’re okay.” His words are muffled by her shoulder, and when she pulls back, his eyes are darting all over his face.

“Where’s Emerson?” she has to ask.

“Driving. He woke up about two hours ago, and he’s been headed straight down the freeway.”

That’s… smart, actually. Stay moving so they can’t catch him, get away until he thinks Bellamy’s hold has worn off. “Let me know when he starts heading back into town.”

“Of course.”

“Hey, don’t I get a hug?” Octavia swings out of the car, grinning. She’s got a lot more blood on her than Bellamy does.

Clarke considers making it a joke, not until you shower, but she doesn’t, because it’s Octavia and it’s been two days and forever and Clarke gives her a hug as well.

“Indra has some killer moves.” She says it like it’s a secret, but Indra is still in the driver’s seat of the car, clearly within earshot. “I mean, wow, Clarke.”
“Guys!” Nyko’s voice is just loud enough to echo as he waves them over to a blank maintenance
door. Next to it, a fake cinder block has been popped open, revealing a key pad, and between this
and the whole bumpersticker thing Clarke is starting to wonder if there’s just a bored Coalition
engineer who has watched too many Batman cartoons. But they tramp into the closet, seven of
them— Indra, Bellamy, Octavia, Murphy, Clarke, Monty and Nyko, and it’s fucking crowded,
even though the closet is actually a lot bigger than she’d expected it to be.

Of course, it’s not a closet. There’s another fake brick and another key code and Nyko is opening
another blank door, that turns out to be an elevator.

“We couldn’t use the elevator in the parking garage because…?” Bellamy asks. If she hadn’t
known him so well, she wouldn’t be able to tell that the hand hanging limply at his side was
actually on his knife.

“It doesn’t go to our floors. Stairs don’t, either. You want to get up here using the stairs, it’s a door
at the other end of the parking garage. We’ll get you codes later.”

They cram into the elevator— it’s bigger than the door had been, by a significant amount. She can
just see the button panel over Octavia’s head— there are only three of them. Indra presses the
second, and the door closes, and nothing happens for a minute.

Are they being assassinated?

Because dying in an elevator is not how Clarke wants to go. But Nyko is within arm’s reach and
just a little in front of her— she could get an arm around his neck, jump on his back, and then add a
couple hundred pounds, pulling him to the ground. That would leave the others and Indra, and
Indra could probably take most of them out but Bellamy is already paranoid and it’s a small space,
not much for ducking and running, so sheer force could—

A voice comes from what Clarke had thought was a vent in the ceiling. “Identify guests, please.”

“Python, Homer, Skylark, Shadow, and a new guy.” Indra looks at Murphy, then at Nyko. Nyko
nods once, she nods back, and it’s all very serious and official and Clarke’s face is killing her.
“Approved by the Commander.”

Another pause. “Eyup.” And then the elevator jerks into motion. It seems slow, as an elevator goes,
but maybe that’s because there are no floor numbers going up, no sense of where they are in this
tower. It could break down and they’d— no, there’s a hatch in the top, if you don’t need a secret
passcode to escape as well. She could get Indra to open it, there’s probably a ladder, she doesn’t
know if she could climb right now because she’s just noticed the dark bruises and scrapes on her
wrists and ankles— those fucking cuffs— Lexa, fiddling with the keys—

“Where is the Commander?” Clarke asks. “Is she back yet?” Is she safe?

Indra clenches her jaw, and Clarke thinks that’s a no, but— “She radioed in when she cleared the
site. She’s fine.”

The elevator stops without dinging.

With all the security Clarke had half expected some sort of bunker, with steel walls and screens—
but it looks like the hall in a nice apartment building. Or at least, it looks like how the halls in the
nice apartment buildings look on TV. Rug. Wallpaper. Doors with letters on them. A woman with
a cane who has the muscle tone to kill any of them three different ways halfway through stepping
out of one of those doors. Blond streaks in her hair, bags under her eyes, and probably a gun under
her coat, boots high enough to contain at least two knives, and the cane could probably be used to —

“Anya,” Indra says, stepping forward and clasping Anya’s forearm. Anya. Lexa has mentioned Anya. Lexa trusts Anya.

Lexa hadn’t gotten into the car with her. She’d stayed behind. Is she mad, about Clarke hugging her? That was a weird thing to do, wasn’t it? Or maybe she was freaked out by Clarke snapping a man’s neck with her weird gravity powers.

Clarke is a little upset about that last one, too.

“Indra, hey.” Anya smiles back. Then, to Clarke— “Wire and the Doc are in B.”

The Doc. Abby. Her mom is okay, her mom is okay, she’s with Raven, they’re here, okay. Okay. Clarke won’t sway a little, but she manages to nod. Her face probably looks ridiculous right now. This is the first time Anya’s met her, and her face is covered in burns and goop. Why is she worried about this?

“Thank you,” Bellamy says after a second. “Which others?”

Anya shrugs. “Not the doorman, sorry.”

“No, that’s me!” A woman comes running out from a door on the end. For a doorman, she looks more like a female body builder, and Clarke tenses as she approaches but her buzzer stays quiet. “Sorry, sorry.”

Indra and Anya look at each other and retreat back into Anya’s room. It’s hard to tell if the look was let’s get away from these idiots and have a stiff drink or I need to tell you something significant. They’re hard to read. Not many people are.

“You’re in B, D and E. There are only three right now, we thought there were only going to be ten of you, um.”

“Four in two five in another,” Octavia says, and that’s right. They’ve gotten Murphy back, they’ve got Abby and Wells. “Cool. We’ll go fill out B. Girl party!” And then Octavia grabs Clarke’s arm and it takes a second for Clarke to remember not to kill her.

“Do you think I’m not going to want to see her?” Clarke mutters, when they come to a stop in front of the door. Not that she had been considering going to another apartment and taking a nap before facing the music. She hadn’t. It would be medically irresponsible, even though Nyko is shuffling the boys towards another apartment and promising Monty an actual splint and Bellamy some ice packs.

It's just a door.

For fuck’s sake, it's just a door.

Clarke’s face hurts.

Chapter End Notes
We're entering Plot: Phase II. But I was getting real bogged down, so here's a mini chapter as an apology for the last chapter mishap.

UPDATE November 2019: check out this art theplaguebeast drew of Superhero!Clarke! :D
Conjunction

Chapter Summary

After

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes


Gunner, in the driver’s seat. She hits the gas. Wells, in the passenger seat, yelps— the van sways dangerously as they turn out onto the road.

“Something exploded,” Turret says. He’s bent over Goggles, the only one who can see in the dim dome light. “Hey, Gog, stop freaking out. You’re heating up, man. There’s only like three little bits of metal in there. Relax.”

“I’m Iron Man,” Goggles says, dazed. “I gotta get me… one of those glowey things.”

He’s not going to last like this. And if one of Sky Crew dies trying to rescue her, Clarke’s never going to get over it. They’re going to have to turn around on the highway, drive past the city and then enter from the south, because they’ve blocked the way back in, and they’ve wasted enough time already— “We have a really good emergency doctor in Bluelake,” Lexa says. They’d have to send one of Sky Crew in to make sure he isn’t chipped, but Lexa doesn’t think that he would have fallen for any of the City’s promises. Still—

“Can’t take him to a doctor,” Turret says. “Thanks for the thought, though.” There’s blood all over his hands as he tries to keep pressure on Goggles’s chest. Siren hovers over his shoulder, clearly desperate to help but knowing that she can’t— they hit a bump, and she bangs her head against the ceiling. Goggles groans.

It might be redundant, but Lexa asks anyway. “Why not?”

“Dude gets high on half an ibuprofen. It’s great when he needs to wake or bulk up, but anesthetic, antibiotics— you couldn’t explain that—”

“So tell them no drugs—”

“Just get ‘em out of me,” Goggles groans. “I’ll heal, probably, just—”

Turret grimaces. “They’re pretty lodged in there.”

X-Ray vision. Right.

Is it always like that? Can he turn it off? Can he read, or look at pictures, or does he only see the rectangle?

“Guys, behind us,” Gunner shouts. Siren squeezes over to the back, peeking out the stripe of
window. She leaves a bloody footprint on the carpet behind her.

“Shit. City?”

Their was the last van out. But before they got out of range, Lincoln had warned that the City was close to getting through the barricade. He and his crew should still be in the trees, waiting until everything is clear before making the five mile hike through the woods to the car lot at the nearest town. They should be okay, they know how to avoid leaving tracks, but Lexa’s going to have to give them all bonuses.

“Turret?”

Turret glances over, nearly going cross-eyed as he looks through the back door. “There’s a lot of guns in there.”

So. Yes. City.

There’s a sun-slash-escape hatch in the roof—Lexa grabs a bullet gun sticks her head out the top. She has to use one of the surveillance monitors to brace her knee, but it’s better than everyone dying. If she breaks it she’ll get them a new one.

It’s a bad angle for shooting all around. A girl leans out the passenger window of the car, firing—Lexa shoots back, aiming for the tires, but the bullet just sparks as it hits the fenders. She’ll need to wait until they get closer, but if they get closer, their van’s tires will be in more danger as well. The car’s windows are probably bulletproof, but she tries anyway, just to test the theory.

The glass might have chipped. It’s hard to tell in the dark. They fire back, another bullet bouncing off the top of the van.

Siren pops up next to her, holding out a dart gun. Lexa takes it, but—

“That’s not going to do anything.”

“Wait for it.” Siren sticks two fingers in her mouth. Lexa braces for an earsplitting whistle, but she doesn't hear anything: at first she assumes that it was a mistake, but Siren holds her hands on either side of her face for a moment before throwing both forward, clenching her fists.

Half a second later, the windshield on the City’s car shatters.

“Neat,” Lexa says, and tranqs the driver. The car swerves, and turns, and Lexa shoots the girl in the passenger seat. She drops, but the car is still moving.

“Bend coming up,” Gunner shouts. Lexa and Siren both duck down below just before they would have been flung into the edge of the roof—instead, Siren crushes Lexa against one of the monitors. Lexa shoves back on instinct, and they both go crashing to the other side.

Goggles yelps as Lexa lands on his foot. Turret glares, then looks behind them.

“They’ve hit the retaining wall,” he says. “At the turn.”

Still sprawled across the floor, Siren holds up a hand.

Against all professional instincts, Lexa gives her a high-five.
It’s Abby that pulls her away from Jasper, after— after she’d barely taken a breath to say hello (I’m okay— did you miss me, maybe with a cocky smile, maybe say nothing and let Abby and Raven figure out if she wants to be hugged, because she doesn’t know herself,) when Harper and Miller are rushed down the hall, Jasper on a stretcher between them. After she saw Wells and Zoe, flanking them, and all four of them talking over each other—

After Clarke turned around and caught Lexa’s eye as she stayed in the elevator, and let the doors close—

(Lexa was covered in blood too, but she’s still standing—)

“Jasper!” Monty had shoved his way down the hall, forgetting secrecy, forgetting code names, forgetting everything, probably, with the sight of his best friend sporting a massive chest wound—

After Nyko gently kicks her out of the room, because her hands won’t stop shaking and her face hurts to move and she can’t fix Jasper like this. After Miller tries to cover up the headache he gets from seeing x-ray for too long, after, after, After Nyko promises that he’ll take care of Jasper and she has nothing to do but believe him—

After all that, her mother guides her into the bathroom and helps her peel off her ER uniform, and the sensor stuck to her side, a layer of dust built up underneath the tape. The rest of her is filthy, and it almost doesn’t seem worth it, getting in the bathtub: it’ll turn into a mudpit. But the idea of a shower— water pound pound pounding against her skin— is even worse so she sits down in the warm water, not caring that she’s naked in front of her mother for the first time since childhood. The Mount Weather grime comes off her leg, easy as you please, when she rubs at it. Clarke can’t remember the last time she took a bath. Her apartment doesn’t—

Didn’t—

Have one.

“Tilt your head back,” Abby says, in her most gentle doctor voice. Clarke does, and her mother pours a cup of water over her hair.

Her hair is disgusting right now. There’s a whole bottle of shampoo on the side of the tub and it might not ever be enough.

“This is unnecessary,” Clarke lies, mostly because she feels like she should— on her own she would never have made it this far. Maybe wiped her feet with a washcloth, or something. “And embarrassing.” But she picks up the cloth offered to her anyway, poking carefully at her stomach.

Abby rubs shampoo into Clarke’s scalp. It’s gentle. More gentle than she can ever remember her being. “My mom had to do this for me when I was thirteen. I hated it too.”

That’s just over half the age Clarke is now, and just under the age Clarke had been the last time she’d lived with Abby. “Why? What happened?”

“I broke both my arms.”

She’s never heard this story. “How do you break both you arms?” Usually when one arm goes you
turn to protect the other one and find a way out— any fighter still alive knows that—

“I fell out of a tree.” And she remembers that Abby never got into fights.

“A tree.”

“I was trying to impress a boy, and didn’t realize that one of the higher branches was dead.”

The ointment is dripping down Clarke’s face in the warm steam of the bathroom, but the idea of wiping it off is… not appealing.

“Was he impressed?”

A comb is involved now, working at the tangles in her hair. It hurts, pulling at the skin on her scalp, her forehead, even though Abby is being as careful as she can. “Well, he felt so bad about it that he was always around to help me out. Carried my books, put my silverware in the bin in the cafeteria. I married him eventually, so I suppose that it worked out in the end.”

It makes perfect sense, really. Griffin women aren’t allowed to fall in love without it hurting first.

“Tilt your head again.”

Clarke does. This time a bead of water falls out and drips down her face. She can feel its entire, agonizing path, down her forehead, her nose, around the side of her mouth, just far enough out to hit the burn there.

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck.

She tries not to react, but Abby notices anyway. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay, Clarke.” And there’s the towel, patting her hair dry, which means in a second it’s going to be time to tackle her face. Her face. Christ. Clarke stands up anyway, wrapping a second towel around herself and tucking it under her armpits. She sits on the toilet seat, and braces herself.

It’s warm and steamy in here. Each prick of moisture hurts.

The first wipe touches her face and she bites down on her tongue so she won’t hiss. Abby might want her to— she has a sense that she’s not reacting to any of this correctly. Abby wants to take care of her, and wants Clarke to get better from said care, to appease her inner doctor and ten years of absent mothering. Bellamy is going to want her to be fine. He’d wanted to kill Emerson, and he’s going to want her to tell him that that urge is okay. Harper is going to want her to be upset about her face, so that she’ll have a partner in deformity, and not feel shallow. Murphy is going to want her to not care about her face, so that he can pretend that there were no consequences to what he did. Lexa—

She doesn’t know how Lexa wants her to be.

She hopes Lexa doesn’t have a preference.
It’s late when she leaves. After Abby bandages her face, after she spends hours trying and failing to sleep the day away, after she’s successfully reassured everyone that she’s Totally Fine, just going to have some iconic scars, it’s her Harry Potter mark, whatever. Then she goes back to hiding.

She doesn’t know if she’s been putting it off or holding herself back, but it’s almost eleven when she goes out into the hall.

Lexa had stayed in the elevator, and said elevator only has three buttons—the bottom floor, the current floor, and somewhere else. So Clarke hits the button for the somewhere else and hopes that it’s correct—that there isn’t a secret staircase or something. Or that she won’t get lost and set off alarms.

Though it’d be Lexa’s fault if she did. Clarke doesn’t have a phone. And this is important.

At least, it’s probably important. Maybe not that important.

It’s just, they have her blood.

It’s not an excuse, it’s a real concern.

The elevator doors close, and it jerks enough when it starts that Clarke ends up a few feet in the air for a second before she drops back down. Fucking hell.

*Get it together, Griffin.*

*Abe Atom Billy Daniel—*

The elevator stops. It doesn’t ding or anything, doesn’t show any sign of where she is. It’s just a room hanging on a steel cord.

She waits.

And waits.

Hits the ‘open door’ button once. Nothing.

Okay. It’s fine. This is fine.

*Ellie Maya Miles—*

She needs to stop freaking out. She isn’t in Mount Weather anymore. But it took her a long time to get out of the habit the first time, *Naomi Rita Sam*, and it’s back in force now, matched to her heartbeats.

“*Please state your name,*” the elevator voice says. And shit, how had she forgotten about that? Clarke flinches, watching her reflection in the doors to make sure she doesn’t look as alarmed as she feels. It’s a failure. But the bandages on her cheek, forehead and chin really take a lot out of her expressional power.

“What?”

“Please state your name,” it repeats.
“Um, Clarke?”

Silence. But of course Lexa’s going to have security. It’s comforting.

“What do you want?”

What is your name. What is your quest. “I need to speak to the Commander.”

More silence.

“Ten meters per second,” Clarke adds, a bit of trivia picked up from Monty just in case they’re still listening.

“What?”

“The velocity of an unladen European swallow.”

If the security guy is amused, he does not convey that over the intercom. But the elevator does start moving again. The doors finally open to reveal a short hallway with only one door. A scowling, broad-shouldered man stands in front of it.

Just that day, Clarke had seen Lexa take down bigger people in just a few seconds.

Maybe he’s there for the aesthetic.

She stares him down, and he stares back, but he doesn’t say anything and so she carefully approaches the door. He’s not wearing ear protectors so he’ll probably try and avoid firing his gun in this small of a space— the holster doesn’t look big enough for a silencer. That means if he attacks, he’ll probably go with the stick first, she can weigh it down and then when he jerks down she can get a fist into his neck, snap his head back like she did that chipped man—

The weight of Clarke’s hand almost jerks her arm out of its socket, and she takes a deep breath. The door is right in front of her now, and she keeps an eye on the guard. He doesn’t stop her when she reaches up a hand to knock, so. She knocks.

Lexa must have already known she was coming— that’s probably the point of the interrogation and the interview. So Clarke has barely tapped once when it opens and— okay, the door is a lot thicker than it had appeared to be from the outside. Six inches of metal hiding behind ordinary looking wood. There’s a metaphor in there, maybe.

The Commander herself is standing in a small entryway. Poorly lit, making her seem both soft and menacing at the same time. Behind her is another closed door, and Clarke imagines that her whole apartment is segmented, like the Titanic.

Bad thought. “Hey,” she says, after a second, because one of them should probably say something.

“Hi,” Lexa says back. “You wanted to talk?”

“Yeah.” Clarke has been watching the guard out of the corner of her eye the whole time, but he’s staring resolutely at the elevator like he expects an army to come pouring out of it any minute. Despite the fact that nine people, at most, would fit inside it. Between her and Lexa they could probably stand a chance, then Clarke could break the elevator, and they’d just have to block the stairs—

“Come on in.” Lexa takes a step back and Clarke remembers that there is no army coming up, that
no one is coming up, this floor of this building is probably the safest place she’s been in years.

She goes in.

Lesa closes the first door before opening the second, leaving them in the darkness for a moment.

But the next room isn’t the caterpillar hall Clarke had expected. It’s— open. Modern. In the corner is a TV, with two couches boxing off the area around a coffee table. The other half of the room is dominated by a kitchen island, framed on two sides by a stove, dishwasher, refrigerator, counter space—a kitchen. It’s kind of weird to think of Lexa having a kitchen. Clarke always sort of imagined her having minions bring her food.

“Nice place,” Clarke manages.

“Are the rooms downstairs okay?” Lexa waves her forward to the island. The island has actual bar stools. What even. It takes Clarke a second to realize that she’s been asked a question.

“Yeah. Of course. They’re great.” Technically an upgrade from their place in the Dropship building, with its tiny rooms and Nia waiting in the wings to turn it into luxury condos. That problem seems so far away, now. “I just wanted to tell you, I remembered— I mean, I hadn’t forgotten, it just, hadn’t come up, but I thought you should know—” Jesus, Clarke. Get it together. (Abe, Atom, Billy, Daniel, Ellie, Maya.) “They took samples of my blood, and my pee. Unless you saw them destroyed, then we have to assume that the City of Light has them, as well as the data they’ve been collecting from Murphy for weeks. Murphy has vastly accelerated healing, and so it’s safe to assume that they’re trying to recreate…” accelerated healing. Lexa has stepped under one of the hanging lamps, reaching for a cabinet, and she looks tired, but not injured. And she hadn’t been, except for her neck—

Her neck—

It’s got a scar on it, small and silvery. Hardly visible unless one had been there a few hours ago, when there had been a knife to it—

Clarke reaches up to her own neck, and Lexa’s eyes tighten. “How— I saw—” she takes a few steps back. Lexa, evasive about her past. Lexa, with no skin showing in a fight. Lexa, fearless in motion, unafraid of injury. Lexa, who she’d been starting to trust. Lexa, whose apartment she’s in right now and who probably knows a thousand ways to kill her, although Clarke could get her in the neck with a bar stool and then go out the window, fall and bounce—

Lesa doesn’t look like she’s about to attack, though. She puts the cup down by the sink without filling it, and takes a step towards Clarke. Body language loose and open. “It’s—”

“You heal. You’re…” Clarke waves a hand. “You have powers.”

A silence. A slight motion at the corner of the Commander’s eye, twitch in her mouth. More of a yes than anything she could have said.

Clarke takes another step back. “I’ve trusted you,” she says. “You have everything. You know my name. My people are living in your building. You’ve met my mother—you have my whole life, and you can’t—”

“That doesn’t mean I owe you mine,” Lexa snaps. Then she sighs, dropping one elbow onto the island and letting her forehead rest in her hand for a moment. It’s a deliberate show of weakness, an attempt at balance, because taking her eyes off of Clarke means Clarke would have an advantage in an attack and Lexa is too good at body language to not be monitoring her own at all times. “Look.”
Clarke waits.

The tile floor of the kitchen area is cold under her feet. Clarke hadn’t even realized she was barefoot when she left the apartment.

“Look at what?”

“Nobody knows.” Lexa indicates the scar. “About me. Not Indra or Anya or Gus—” she stops. That hadn’t been intentional. She’s cracking, too. “Fine. Fine.”

“Fine what?”

“Come with me.”

“What?”

“C’mere. And be quiet.” Lexa jerks her head towards the hall, and Clarke follows her. Three steps back, close enough that she could get an arm around the Commander’s neck— she has to stop thinking like this, and she knows it, but Mount Weather has buried itself back in her head and Lexa has been hiding superpowers. The hall is short, barely a nook, with three doors. One is ajar—inside, a nightlight throws a toilet into quiet relief. Lexa goes for the left one, pressing a finger to her lips as she opens it carefully.

A digital clock shows the outline of a sleeping boy, only his eyebrows and forehead visible under a mountain of blankets. Books and dirty clothes cover the floor. On top of the clock is a rectangle of wood with a streak of metal through it— switchblade.

Jesus.

Lexa closes the door and waves her back out to the main room.

“What,” Clarke manages. Lexa has a son? The kid looked kind of old to be Lexa’s son, but she’s not very good at children. Maybe he’s a brother, but he looked young to be a brother.

“That’s Aden,” Lexa says. There’s a weight and gravity to her words that hadn’t been there before— the weight of this secret now on Clarke’s shoulders as well.

“Aden… lives here?” Of course he lives here. It doesn’t really look like a place that a kid would live, but—

“That time you were in the elevator I spent hiding his stuff in the closet. Normally there’s like, his books all over the table, he’s got a video game collection, I stuck them under the couch.”

Okay. That’s kind of funny. Clarke sits back down on the stool, watching. Lexa doesn’t go back for her water glass— instead she leans on the island, then stands, walks halfway around it, leans again, and then resumes her pacing. And this— this isn’t calculated. This is the Commander, flailing. She’s tapping her fingernails on the counter, someone else’s blood still crusted beneath them. Then she swallows, and holds out a hand.

“Alexis Heda,” she says.

Clarke smiles a little as she reaches out to shake it. There’s something precious between their fingertips. Something fragile.

“Clarke Griffin,” she answers, even though Lexa probably knows this already.
Lexa’s hand is burning.

“When I was—” no, that’s not how to start this story. “My mother was—” and that’s not it either. Lexa likes to pretend that she comes from nowhere. Tricks people into forgetting that they don’t know her last name. Her accent is empty and she is—

She is—

“My family was military.” That feels like a more reasonable beginning. “Mother, father, grandparents. Career military. My parents met on base, got married on base, I grew up—” But did she? “No, that’s not—”

She’s never told this story.

She’s told pieces, used them as weapons, but she’s never told it honestly. Never told it fully. She isn’t sure she can do it now, either, but Clarke is right. All of her life is Lexa’s to know, now, and Lexa has only gotten as far as she had by not making such exchanges of information equal, but. But.

She wants to.

Looking at Clarke, wrapped up in standard safehouse giant pajamas, hair frizzy from drying without being brushed, face bandaged— it would be easy to want to protect her, and Lexa does, but she can also see the way Clarke is tense, still not sure if Lexa is going to attack. Clarke could kill her three different ways in under ten seconds, by her count (gravitational neck snap, hit her chin with the stool and then her neck with the stool’s leg, there’s the extension cord going along the floor because the island doesn’t have any outlets in it, although Lexa could probably fight off that one, so maybe it would take a couple minutes,) and she’s a threat, pure and simple.

And Lexa wants to tell her everything.

“It’s okay,” Clarke says. “You actually have to tell me. I mean, I’m curious, but I don’t want to—”

Lexa wants.

“It’s okay. Just give me a second.”

(Clarke gave Lexa her mother, and Lexa gave Clarke Aden. Clarke gave Lexa her home, and now Clarke is in Lexa’s kitchen. Technically, they’re even.)

“I think it started around Vietnam and the Cold War. Soldiers getting horrific injuries, the threat of nuclear war. Military scientists were trying to figure out a way to increase people’s healing rates. Maybe pump ‘em full of steroids, make a General America, who the hell knows.’ Some people know. Lexa doesn’t like to think about that, which means that she thinks about it at least once every couple of days. “My mom was pregnant with me during the Gulf War. Desert Storm. My dad was deployed.” He was gone for most of this. So what he knows, what he told Lexa, isn’t complete.
“My dad fought in that one,” Clarke says. It’s another piece she’s holding out, and Lexa takes it.

“When she was in the hospital she started on this— treatment, of sorts. A trial for the healing power. It didn’t work. It gave her a blood disease. She died shortly before I was born.”

“Shortly before?”

One of the doctors had once reminisced about how he had pulled Lexa, screaming and covered in black blood, out of her mother’s dead body. Lexa hadn’t found the story at all charming.

She’d been six.

“A few minutes. And my blood was black.”

Clarke looks horrified. “And you could heal?”

“No.” But they’d been terrified of her going outside, scraping her knee. They had been ass deep in ethics violations. She hadn’t figured that out until later. But it turns out that testing drug trials on a pregnant woman, causing bizarre birth defects, and then experimenting on the child is illegal as hell. Even in the name of patriotism. Who would have thought. “That came later. I’d developed an immunity to what killed my mother. It took them a while to get there. I think I was seven.” She can’t stand anymore— it’s an objectively horrible story, but it had just been her life. And it wasn’t like they were awful to her. Just a lot of classified buildings and hardly any other kids to play with. Lexa sits down on the stool next to Clarke, and lets herself tap her finger on the island. Clarke has her life, she can have her ticks, too.

“Your dad let them?”

“My blood was black,” Lexa says. “Of course they had to study me, to understand what had happened. I don’t know if he knew that they had caused it, at first. I know he did later.” Play the game, Alexis. “It wasn’t like it was horrible. I lived with him on the base, most of the time. Indra was around a lot. She taught me to fight.”

“I thought Indra didn’t know.” Clarke doesn’t sound too freaked, but Clarke was experimented on by mad scientists, too.

“She doesn’t. Everyone assumed I went to school.” And she’d had her own life. Indra doesn’t have a closet full of skeletons so much as a mother-in-law apartment. Lexa can see traces of them, sometimes, when the older woman lets her guard down. It’s a rare thing.

“Did you?”

“Sometimes. My dad died shortly after we invaded Afghanistan. And a couple years after that they tried replicating their earlier results. They thought that this time the mother wouldn’t get sick. But she did. And then we had Aden. But it’s not a practical system, having to raise soldiers from birth. It’s a lot of resources. And Bunny Greenhouse had just blown the whistle on Haliburton, and everyone was getting nervous. The main scientist who worked with me got promoted out of there, and I used that as a chance. I made copies of all the incriminating information, fifteen years of medical records, I found my mom’s autopsy, and Linda’s— Aden’s mom— and then I took Aden off base to go to the park and ran.”

“Jesus.”

Lexa shrugs. “Eventually I made it to Polis. Met up with Indra again. Realized I had some great blackmail material. They can bring manufacturing jobs where I tell them to, or I can tell the
reporter of my choosing about Project Nightblood. Ruin Becca’s career, and that’s just the start—
why are you laughing?”

Because that’s what Clarke’s doing. She drops her head into her hands for just a second before
jerking away, like she’d forgotten the bandages. Could have been crying, but there’s no tears.

“It’s just,” Clarke gasps. “You’re Project Nightblood?”

That’s not an expected reaction. Lexa leans closer to her. “You know it?”

“I said my dad was army, right? He got wind of experiments on babies, ten years ago. He was
going to expose it. I overheard him, and insisted on helping— it was take your daughter to work
day, the plan was that I was going to get lost and he was going to go looking for me in the wrong
place.” She stops laughing. “But we got caught, he got shot, and I got sent to juvie max.”

She had been trying to be a hero then, too. It’s easy to imagine— Clarke, a teenager, trying to take
on the world.

God, Lexa loves her.

Oh.

Oh, shit.

“Maybe we were meant to end up here,” Lexa says. It’s a cliched statement, but the only one she
can think of to describe how they’re here, in her top floor apartment, six inches of reinforced metal
protecting them from the outside world. With bodies behind them, and probably ahead of them,
and a city counting on them and—and—

“I don’t believe in fate,” Clarke says.

Lexa kisses her.

She hadn’t thought this through. Hadn’t formulated a strategy. She doesn’t like to be impulsive, but
she’s kissing Clarke, and Clarke is kissing her back. She’s slid off her stool and one of her hands is
in Lexa’s hair and she’s standing between Lexa’s knees and Lexa wants, and this is probably a bad
time because Clarke’s emotions are all over the place and Lexa wants, and Lexa loves, and. And.
And. And.

Chapter End Notes

(And Lexa's comic book illiteracy continues.)
Bridge of Spies

Chapter Summary

“I know where you sleep,” Turret says.

Ten days after Skylark was taken out of the ER on a fork lift, Arkadia is still waiting, balanced on the edge of either a new order or anarchy. It’s hard to tell which.

It’s enough for Bryan to start carrying his dad’s old gun, though. Enough to make him track everyone as he walks the neighborhood after dark: there’s Bill on the corner, smoking and looking at his phone, and there’s two neckbeards having an animated discussion about a video game as they walk briskly down the sidewalk, and Cindy, the hooker who usually hangs out near the Ark—she’s stepping out of the drugstore with three bags of Lays.

He’ll make another loop around the block, just in case. Just to make sure that—well—

Okay.

There’s a chance he’s looking for Sky Crew.

And it’s not just because he has a crush on Turret the size of the Rock. It’s that Jack from the night shift lives in the Dropship building, and he said that a hall on the third floor had tried to kill a bunch of guys that had tried to get in there, after the Skylark video broke. It’d been crazy booby trapped.

And empty.

Maybe they’ve all left. Maybe they were all grabbed, too.

Maybe they’re dead.

Maybe they got them.

They’re not stupid, in Arkadia. Everyone knows something’s up with that City of Light deal. Everyone’s got someone who’s family has gone crazy, but the crazy people have gotten real good at hiding it lately, so there’s no telling who’s answering to the robot overlord, or whatever it is. Keep your head down and don’t accept plastic wafers from strangers, that’s how you get by. Nora’s been bringing all sorts of weird stories home from school: it’s been the talk of the fifth grade, at least this week. Rumor is a couple of them are on City, but it’s hard to tell, with ten year olds.

Really rich fancy people send their kids there. The mayor’s kid. Some CEOs and business people who got rich off shady dealings. If the ten year olds are on it then their parents probably are too and that’s terrifying on so many levels.

(His instinct is to not care. He forgets sometimes that his mom is now a Fancy Rich person, courtesy of Adam. She’d married him two years ago, but Bryan has yet to get over how wrong he feels when he goes to their house. He doesn’t belong in Fir Ridge. He’s from Arkadia, with its shit and its beauty.)
He’s on his second sweep of the back alley when a woman jogs up to him. Probably in her forties, doesn’t look like she’s carrying a weapon. But it’s not exactly normal for women to go running through dark alleys, either, and he braces himself.

“Hey, sorry,” she says. “Do you have the time?”

“Um,” he reaches into his pocket for his phone, which is when she grabs his arm and twists, grabbing the gun from his hoodie pouch as he tries to pull away.

“Thanks!” she’s sounding cheerful and he’s not sure if he should run after her— she has his gun, but also, she has his gun— when a figure drops from the roof above them, tackling the woman to the ground. Bryan jumps back, into the weak protection of two trash bins. Should he run? He should probably run, but it’s a narrow alley, and he’s not sure he can get past them.

The second person pulls out a gun of their own, and holy shit, and Bryan braces for the noise— but it just fwips and the woman drops.

“All clear,” he says, turning to Bryan— and oh, it’s Turret. He’s alive and still saving Bryan’s ass, even though he probably doesn’t remember the last time he saved Bryan’s ass and, Bryan is going to say thanks but that’s when Bill comes around the corner with a group of guys Bryan doesn’t recognize behind him.

Bill, no.

There’s grunting and punching and Bryan should help, probably, but he’s not a fucking superhero and the only fight he’s ever been in was in high school when Jerry Thomas called him a fag, and Bryan had tried and failed to punch his face in. And he can’t tell what’s happening— it’s a scrum of bodies and arms, like that blob game kids play, and one guy falls into him and Bryan shoves him away on reflex, but then there’s a second person coming down from the rooftop, getting two guys around the necks, yanking them away from Turret and throwing them to the ground. One grabs her ankle and she shoots him without looking, and then she’s got a foot in another’s chest and she turns and her face is illuminated in the weak light from the windows—

It’s Skylark.

Well. Her name is Clarke Griffin, he knows this now, everyone knows it, but it feels disrespectful to think it. She hadn’t wanted it out there. It’d be like jerking off to Dylan Sprouse’s leaked nudes. Or calling Robert Downey Jr. ‘Bob’.

But she’s not even wearing a mask. Wouldn’t do much use anymore, probably, since her picture was everywhere— but in the picture she didn’t have the scars. Is that what the fork lift guys did?

The mob is down within seconds, and Turret leans over slightly, touching his nose. “I had that,” he says.

“Of course. We were all very impressed with you.”

They’re both quiet a second, until Turret says, inexplicably, “Go to hell, Snap.” Then he straightens, looks at Bryan, and, damn damn damn, his memory had not embellished how fine that jawline is. Or the mouth. Or the light sideburns and mustache-beard combo that should make him look like a total douchebag that he manages to pull off. “Hey.”

“Did you just ‘hey’ me?” Bryan asks, because he was just attacked, and has no control over his mouth in front of Very Attractive Men.
Turret shrugs. “Haven’t seen you in a while. Thought you were avoiding getting mugged.”

Turret remembers him. Turret remembers him!! If Bryan’s hands weren’t shaking, he might be holding them next to his face as he made dramatic expressions. Or maybe something a little more respectful and a lot less gay.

“Wait,” Skylark says, walking a few steps closer. “This is the guy?”

“Go die in a hole,” Turret says flatly. “How do you even remember—”

“It was a memorable night.” Skylark squints at Bryan. “This is totally the guy.”

Bryan is a guy? Of course he’s a guy. But he’s a guy that Turret talked about? Bryan had given him his phone number, because Turret had seemed to be fishing, but then he’d never called or checked in and Bryan had assumed that he’d forgotten, or realized he didn’t care after all, or Bryan had totally misread the situation.

He’s screaming internally again.

“I know where you sleep,” Turret says. “How’s it going, Bryan?”

He remembers his name. Also, he was just attacked. “Well some lady tried to steal my dad’s gun.”

“Yeah, you should be less obvious with that.”

Skylark is standing uncomfortably close to him right now. Well, three feet away, but it feels like less. The face thing is definitely new, maybe why she couldn’t wear a mask. The lines look like a stylized bird, with a beak next to her eye, the partial curve of a head over the brow, the diagonal wing line across the opposite cheek. A leg on her chin. Whoever did it didn’t have very good motor control.

Jesus, that’s super fucked up.

She picks up Bryan’s father’s gun from where it had landed on the ground and turns on the safety before handing it to him. “Well, we best be going. Nice to meet you.”

Is this part of his life? Bryan takes the gun, and his hands are sweaty, and he’s too busy making sure that he isn’t going to accidentally shoot anyone that it takes him a second to realize that there’s a piece of paper wrapped around the handle.

And Skylark jumps, going up, up until she twists around and swings over the roof, and Turret nods at Bryan again, opens his mouth, closes it again, and then he’s ziplining up after her.

Chasing muggers, being out here again, Raven’s voice in her ear— it’s almost normal, almost like the last two weeks haven’t happened. If she didn’t have throbbing burns instead of the comforting pressure of her mask, and if people didn’t gape when they saw her. But she wants them to see her, that’s the point of this whole excursion— we’re all alive and Arkadia is still protected.

But instead of climbing up the side of the Dropship building when they’re done, they slip into the
back of an unmarked vehicle, leaving Arkadia as fast as they can.

“Hey,” Arty says, turning the car on with a button instead of a key because that’s the kind of bullshit cars are doing these days. “Good publicity?”

“Made a contact,” Clarke says. “Walked past some security cameras.”

Harper and Monroe are taking over for the day, schedules free and clear since they’d all become unemployed.

Hopefully nobody’s boss will connect their sudden disappearance to the actions of Sky Crew. But with the City of Light, everyone is going weird.

Case in point: she and Miller are in a car, being driven by one of Lexa’s people, going back to Lexa’s tower, which is their— well, it’s not quite home, but their residence until the City mess is sorted out.

And Artigas is nice. Good tempered Tond Circle kid, whose weird crossbow obsession can be forgiven because of his crazy driving.

Said crazy driving manages to get them back to the tower unimpeded, and Clarke wants to talk to Miller in the elevator, but there’s always someone listening there. When he turns to go into Jasper, Monty, Bellamy and Murphy’s room— the new three-twelve, because Jasper refuses to be left out of anything, even though he still can’t do things like sit up and move— she catches his shoulder instead, pulls him into her apartment.

Well.

Having a private conversation isn’t as easy as ducking into one’s apartment anymore. They have to take refuge in the bedroom that has become Clarke’s, even though she has yet to successfully sleep there. A fact that is very germane, right now.

“When you said you know where I sleep,” she says, because she isn’t sure how else to bring it up without telling him anything he might not have guessed.

“I mean I have x-ray vision, Clarke. I check every time I hear the elevator.”

Oh.

Means he isn’t sleeping much either, but he’d never been much of a sleeper. When Clarke pictures him, it’s always crouching at the edge of the neighboring cell, eyes open.

“It’s not like that,” she says, even though it’s at least a little bit Like That. How Like That it is, though, has been in a weird sort of limbo, where Lexa kissed Clarke and Clarke kissed Lexa back and many times over the last week one or both of them have indicated a desire to repeat the action, and sometimes they have followed through on that mutual desire— but that’s been it. For the most part, “we’ve just got a lot to plan.”

“To plan, right.” He squints. “You’re not having a gay panic, are you? Because like, I’m gay, and all, but I’m really not good with—”

“I’m not having a gay panic.”

“Are you sure? You seem a little—” he waves a hand, apparently trying to encompass all that Clarke is. Whether or not he is successful remains up to interpretation.
The room is bigger than her bedroom at home. It’s got a carpet without stains and a double bed. Suddenly it feels very, very small.

“A little what, Miller?” A little traumatized? She’s not. She was only in Mount Weather a couple days. She’s shaken it off.

“Gay.”

“Miller—”

“What? You said you weren’t having a gay panic, not that that thing up there—” he points at the ceiling, and Clarke can only assume that he is referring to Lexa’s apartment, “isn’t gay.”

“Nate—”

“Do you trust her?”

Do I have a choice, Clarke wants to ask, but of course she has a choice— she made it weeks ago. “Yeah,” she manages. “Yeah I do.”

“Do you trust us?”

Jesus. She takes a few steps back, dropping onto her bed. Starts working on taking her boots off. “Of course I do.” But she can’t look at him. She has to look at him.

He sits down, leaning against the wall by the door. He’s grimy and dressed in black and doesn’t fit in with the clean white walls, but do any of them? Has anyone who has ever stayed here, needing a safehouse? “Are you sure?”

She gets the shoe off. It falls to the ground, a few crumbs of dirt falling off. She’ll have to dig out a vacuum. “Of course I do. I just— it’s private.”

“The planning?”

Right. The planning. “That part I’m going to tell everyone. We’re just— working on details.”

“Of the plan.”

She kicks off the second boot. “Christ, Nate, what do you want me to say?”

“What are you planning?”


“And that’s not something we should all be discussing?”

It is. But they’ve had that discussion, too. And calling her conversations with Lexa might ‘planning sessions’ might be giving them and their insomnia too much credit. “That’s not how she does things. She’s used to planning something with a few representatives. Not…” not what they do. Not what they used to do.

“We aren’t the Coalition,” Nate says. “That’s not how we do things.”

“Maybe it has to be.”
“Maybe.” He nods a few times. “But then you tell us about it. We decide that’s how we’re going to
do it. You don’t go sneaking off at night, or whatever.”

Not yet, anyway. Clarke wonders if it will ever get that far. “Yeah. You know I’d tell you guys if
it was anything concrete. But it’s just—it’s not like we know the other leaders. We don’t have
anything to bring to the table, in that respect.” Not like Clarke knows them either. But he doesn’t
call her on it.

“As long as you stay objective.”

It’s hard not to bristle. “The hell’s that supposed to mean?”

Miller presses his palms together, then pulls them apart slowly like there’s a banner between them.
“Gaaay,” he says, drawing out the word.

Clarke flops back on the bed. She’s still wearing her gross things, but she’s on top of the blankets.
Should she wash them? Where do they wash things here? Is there a laundry room? Or do they put
all the blankets in a trash bag and haul them to a laundromat somewhere?

Does she even have any cash anymore?

“Go away,” she tells Miller.

The door opens, and at first she thinks he’s obeyed, but then Octavia’s voice is very nearby,
shouting “Come on, loverboy, we gotta make fun of you!” Then she goes silent, and Clarke sits up
in time to see the other girl looking dramatically from her to Miller and back again. “Is something
going on?”

“Apparently not.” Miller stands up. “Come on, Clarke. Let us go listen to the straight people.”

They’re making fun of Miller. Jokey. Friendly. But if Clarke—if Clarke walked in there and told
them that she’d kissed the Commander, that she was desperate to know what her skin felt like
under her hands, that she wanted to trace her abs, her breasts, with her tongue—

Probably wouldn’t go over with as much good humor.

The longer she waits, the worse it’ll be.

But she’s barely talked about this with Lexa. She’s done more planning for Miller’s love life than
she has her own. Because last week, that night—Lexa had kissed her and then they had kept
kissing, and at one point Lexa said “this is probably a bad idea, we’re both probably still strung out
on adrenaline,” and Clarke said “yeah, okay,” before seeing what Lexa’s earlobe tasted like (not
much, but Lexa’s reaction is great) and then later Clarke said “this is horrible timing” and Lexa
said “yep” before learning Clarke’s reaction to having her ear bitten (meh) and right behind her ear
licked (hng.) And eventually they pulled apart, both breathing maybe harder than they should be,
they’re fucking fighters and they got winded by kissing and Clarke had wanted, wanted to be
somewhere horizontal, she’d wanted to pull Lexa on top of her, wanted to taste more of Lexa’s skin
—wanted Lexa’s thighs in her hands, wanted to pull them up to her face—

And it’s at that point she remembered her face, and how painful it would be for anyone to sit on it
in the near future, and she had just been kidnapped and tortured and that’s never a good time to
make emotional decisions. But she had wanted, god, how she’d wanted. And Lexa ran a finger
over the shell of her ear, and her eyes were so gentle Clarke thought it might break her.

“Have you slept at all?” she had asked. And Clarke had shaken her head, and that’s how they’d
ended up curled into Lexa’s bed, Lexa tucked against Clarke’s front, their hands twisted together.

Time had passed. Hours. Maybe. Minutes, definitely. And Clarke had been breathing, and Lexa had been breathing, but they’d been too carefully matched. Sure enough, after a time, Lexa had whispered, “you awake?”

Clarke smiled. Taken back to sleepovers past and a childhood and— “yeah.” There’s a rustle as Lexa rolls over, and they’re facing each other now. They hadn’t slept much after that, but they hadn’t done much else, either.

And in the morning she had gone out to the main room, only to find Aden eating Lucky Charms. And only the Lucky Charms— every few seconds, he would pour a little more cereal into the bowl, pick out the marshmallows, and then continue. It was one thing to know of Aden as a concept, see him asleep, and then another to have him there, doing something as normal as sorting Lucky Charms.

No powered people she’s ever known have seemed particularly normal. There’s Raven and her kitsch Star Wars crap, and Bellamy and his pretentious need to talk about pretentious literature, and it’s not like they don’t have moments— but this is a kid—

And then he looked up at her, stared for a second, then dropped below the counter and shrieking.

So maybe not that normal.

Lexa was behind her in two steps, gun in one hand and knife in the other. “Clarke, look out—”

Then she blinked, looking from the source of Aden’s shrieks to Clarke, and put the gun down. “It’s fine, Aden.”

There was a pause and then Aden’s blond head popped back up over the countertop. “Oh, okay. But you said—”

“You did good,” Lexa assured him. “This is Skylark.”

Aden had gaped at her, and then unleashed a story about how his friend Nora’s older brother Bryan had been saved by Turret and he thinks Turret is really cool and Nora thinks that they’re going to get married, or something. Which was when Clarke remembered that guy, back at the beginning of everything— the night that they’d first found the chips, the night she’d met Wells— who had given Miller his number. His name had been Bryan, too.

So she’d decided to go on patrol with Miller in Bryan’s area.

Intentionally driven the City of Light woman they were chasing towards his building. Her trying to steal his gun had been a stroke of luck, but Clarke had had other backup plans.

It’s a win-win, really. They get another set of eyes on the ground, and Miller might even get laid.

It’s not manipulative. Or wrong.

Probably.

Clarke follows Miller out of her room and across the hall. Raven and Monty are at their usual posts by the computers, Jasper is carefully arranged on the couch. Bellamy is in the corner under a generic doctor’s office pastoral scene, where he has been for days, fingers on a trackpad as he plots Emerson’s route. Clarke drops down next to him.
“Where is he?”

“About a day out of the city, if he doesn’t stop.” Bellamy’s index finger trembles, just a little, logging a curvy road on the map. After waking up, Emerson had gotten in a car and driven due west— he’d only stopped for few-hour breaks, and finally turned around a couple days ago.

Maybe he hadn’t believed Murphy about the twelve hour time frame. Maybe he was just being overly cautious. Or thought he was getting out of range.

Or maybe he’s been doing out the City of Light across the Midwest. Maybe this is the break in their quarantine. Maybe they’ve already lost.

When he was younger, Marcus Kane wanted to be a politician. That ambition had lasted him through college, through two elections as a campaign staffer, and the subsequent realization that he was a bit of an asshole, and not in the loveable, electable way. He hated dealing with nuance, and the opposing party and half of his own party were full of idiots, and so by twenty five he had left his political career in shame and joined the Atlanta police force. By thirty five, he had left the Atlanta police force in a fit of pique and joined the Polis PD.

In that time, he’s seen a lot of weird shit.

There had been the Atlanta Underwear Club. The Creepy Easter Bunnies of Midtown. The entire congressional campaign in the tenth district.

And then he ended up in Arkadia, with actual superhero vigilantes who have no understanding of “chain of evidence” or what constitutes “coercion.” He’s got the sense that a capture by Sky Crew is supposed to be scary enough that one is deterred from future crime, and that’s a very worrisome precedent. And Kane already works for an incredibly corrupt police department.

And now there’s the mind control thing.

He isn’t sure what to make of the mind control thing.

He tries to not make anything of it in public. He’d gone on a tinder date last week with a woman who tried to give him a chip, and that’s really taken the enthusiasm out of Marcus’s attempt at a social life. So now he’s just got the bonsai tree his mom had sent him, which he has named Dumbledore, and sometimes he talks to Carwright after work as they walk to their cars. That’s going to be it, until he gets mind controlled as well or this city sinks into the twisted abyss from whence it came.

But the paperwork hasn’t changed. Marcus is deep in forms when a woman clears her throat. Possibly for the second time, if her expression is anything to go by. She has the air of a woman who doesn’t tolerate being ignored, but that might just be what her face looks like.

“How are you Officer Kane?” she asks, staring hard at the nameplate on his desk. He double checks it to make sure it still says ‘Officer M. Kane,’ because it would be just like some of their rookies to change it to ‘Officer M. Pain’ or some nonsense like that. But it doesn’t.
“I am,” he says. “What can I do for you?”

“A man tried to steal my bag,” she says, voice flat and a little too loud. Marcus wants to ask her to lower her voice, but according to a thinkpiece his mom had sent him a while back, you aren’t supposed to complain about women’s voices, so he doesn’t. “I took a picture of him on my phone.”

She hands him an iPhone that’s not in a case, and Marcus takes it, feeling a bit like he’s holding a newborn. Who the hell doesn’t have a phone case?

A woman who doesn’t have a picture on her phone, apparently.

It’s a text chat, with some text in the window that hasn’t been sent. The cursor blinks at him.

Kane reads the messages, watches his life pass before his eyes, then deletes the text and writes a response. He hands it back to her. “Come with me.”

He leads her down the hall, into the half of the interrogation room behind the two-way mirror. He can say that they needed some quiet, or that he left a binder of mugshots in here, if someone asks—they probably won’t ask, but he’ll need an excuse if they do—but they’re going to have to be fast.

But his job is to protect people, even if he mostly goes cleanup, even if the police and this city have a rotting core just waiting to fall apart. Where one woman gets to rule them all, and one company employs half their residents. It’s his job to serve and protect and sometimes that means giving up on the law. Sometimes it means talking to a woman who has a device in her hand, turning slowly around the room—it takes him a second to realize that she’s scanning for bugs.

_I’m with Sky Crew_, her message had said. _The officer in the corner is City of Light. Is there somewhere we can talk?_
Castling

Chapter Summary

At 10:05 a.m., she calls a meeting.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At 7:10 a.m., Carl Emerson, Mount Weather Security Detail, rolls into Polis via Bluelake. At 7:45, he stops at one of the outhouses by the lake to go to the bathroom. A jogger pauses to take a selfie.

At 7:30 a.m., Carl Emerson, Mount Weather Security Detail, stops at a red light. A telephoto lens focuses on his face as the traffic camera notes the license plate.

At 8:30 a.m., Carl Emerson ditches his car at a lot in Argo Dale. He also changes his clothes. The geocasher in the OBEY t-shirt and Yoda hat ignores him, focusing on checking under all the bins.

At 9:00 a.m., Carl Emerson gets off the bus in Azgeda Park. He nods to the police officer—nothing to see here—and presents himself to the entrance to a gated community. The police officer answers his phone.

At 9:05 a.m., Lexa stares at the row of pictures produced by Bryan, Raven, Bryan again (this time in one of Raven’s hats), and Marcus Kane. Next to the photos is a print-out of the map Homer had made, tracking his movement.

At 10:00 a.m., Homer says that Carl Emerson is still in Nia’s Azgeda Park home

At 10:05 a.m., she calls a meeting.

Roan saunters into the conference room— it’s the only way Clarke can think to describe it. He walks in like he knows what’s going on, knows that they’re going to lose—or like he just got spectacularly laid and wants everyone to know. Sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference. It’s not like she knows him.

But he knows her.

“Clarke,” he says cheerfully, like they’re old friends. It makes her want to apply liberal use of fingernails to his face, but she keeps her expression blank.

“Roan,” she responds, deciding on the spot not to call him Mr. Frost, now or ever. “Nice to meet you.”
He sits across from them at the table. There’s a pile of booklets under his arm, which he is about to present, when Lexa holds up a hand.

“We aren’t here to talk about the Dropship Building.”

That throws him, just for a second. “You sure? I just assumed, when I saw Clarke here, that she was going to threaten me.” There’s just enough condescension in his tone to let Clarke know that he’s wary of her. Good.

“I don’t threaten,” she says, with as much threat in her voice as she thinks she can get away with. “Not unless I think someone is a threat.”

He raises his eyebrows.

“I actually brought you in in the hopes that we could come to an agreement,” Lexa says. “About the City of Light.”

The eyebrows don’t come down. “And you think I can do what about it, exactly?”

“You mom is behind it.” Probably. Almost definitely. Clarke puts down the last picture, the one that Marcus had taken, of Emerson waiting at the gate. “That’s Carl Emerson. We go way back. He used to work at Mount Weather. Couple weeks ago, he dragged me out of Arkadia and brought me back there.”

“Very touching,” Roan says. “And this proves what, exactly?”

“He’s not City of Light. But he’s working with them. He suggested that there’s a bigger boss out there. Then we beat him up and he ran straight to your mother.”

“And this proves?”

“Call it the straw that broke the camel’s back,” Lexa says. The targeting of Sky Crew. The surge in Arkadia. The way she’s retreatted from making a nuisance of herself the last few months, but “I don’t think the evidence is what you’re interested in.”

He leans on his elbows. “Oh do tell.”

“You’re not actually an asshole.” Lexa says it like it’s a concession. The sun is lighting up her hair, giving her a halo, and Clarke wants to draw her. “And Nia knows it. That’s why she replaced you. But,” and here she leans forward, folding her hands, “I think we can both agree that Ontari in a position of power is not in either of our best interests. And neither is leaving Azgeda Park without leadership.”

“So you want a coup,” Roan says. “Take out Ontari and my mother, install me as the friendly leader of the rogue neighborhood.”

Clarke leans forward as well. The angle gives him a good view of her breasts— not a necessary tactic, or one that she’s entirely comfortable with, but it doesn’t hurt to use what’s in her arsenal. “Certainly if you help us expose your mother, you’d be primed for it. The son, loyal to his people, wrestled with the hard choice and did what was right. Helped save us all from Nia’s scheming and mad science.” She realizes that she’s laying it on a little thick here, but Roan called her by her first name, and maybe he’s the kind of guy who would appreciate it. She resists the urge to flutter her lashes.

“You’d be a hero to the city,” Lexa adds.
Not to be one-upped, Clarke jumps back in. “Nay, the world.”

“Uh huh.” Roan crosses his arms. “And if instead I think that my best place is with the woman who can mind control people, and I tell her about this meeting?”

Clarke doesn’t reach for her gun, but she thinks about it, and her thoughts might be showing on her face from how Roan is watching her.

Lexa doesn’t seem phased. “Please, as if you don’t know that you could get a lot more out of me by holding this over my head.”

“You make a good argument, Commander.”

“Good,” Lexa says. “Skylark, a word in my office, please.”

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Roan loiters just outside of the Grounder Tower, in the gap between it and the next building over. It’s not wide enough to be considered an alleyway—at two and a half feet it could be generously considered a passageway, and less generously considered an ADA nightmare. But anyone coming out of the building will be headed—

“Evening, Griffin.”

She doesn’t act surprised when she stops, just gives him a once-over. Those scars really add something to her whole look. “What?”

“I wanted a chat. Come, pull up some brick.”

She takes a couple steps closer to him, then leans against the opposite wall. Both of their legs reach all the way across, the two of them creating an X as they stare each other down.

“You wanted to chat?”

He shrugs. It’s hard to shrug when all his weight is on his shoulders, but he thinks the effort is impressive. Skylark doesn’t look impressed, but that’s her problem. “I want to know who I’m working with before I get into bed with them. And you’re a piece I haven’t figured out. So please enlighten me.”

A motorcycle with an intentionally damaged muffler roars past. Probably one of the Tond Circle guys. Lowlifes.

Skylark doesn’t say anything. Roan thought he had been clear enough.

“Lexa wouldn’t have had you in that meeting if there wasn’t something that you brought to it. It’s clear what you get from cozying up to her, but I want to know what you do for her.” He doesn’t use Lexa’s title on purpose—it annoys the ones that are loyal to her position. Skylark doesn’t react, just jerks her chin up a little like she’s trying to be taller.

“I’ve got a few tricks,” she says. Her voice is cold.
Oh. So the other shoe hasn’t dropped for her yet.

Roan can work with this. “Well, let me be the one to tell you that the Commander,” and there he adds as much derision as he can, because honestly, who even calls themselves that, “doesn’t keep anyone around who isn’t part of her grand plan.”

A win. Skylark’s hand twitches upwards a bit, and with her chin up like that, he can barely see it—the shadow of a hickey under her jaw. There had been an attempt to cover with concealer, but either she hadn’t had a mirror, or she hadn’t thought people would look too closely. Roan always looks closely. It hadn’t been there before Lexa asked her for a private chat.

This is better than he could have ever thought.

“And what makes you think I’m any different?” she asks, but she sounds younger when she says it.

“Hmm.” He tips an imaginary hat. “Be at the B Spot at ten pm. See you around, Clarke.”

He leaves her standing there, hopefully processing what he’s said. It’s not like he wants to bring the rain on her little parade, but being manipulated isn’t much fun either. For propriety’s sake, he makes a point of not thinking about Lexa and Clarke giving each other hickeys as he glares at the downtown traffic, slowly making his way towards Azgeda Park.

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Once he gets to his mother’s grand house, Roan has to wait to be announced.

It’s not like she’s in anywhere official. He’s timed his visit so that she’ll, in all likelihood, be on the couch in her pajamas watching Game of Thrones. Nia is nothing if not appropriate.

Still.

Ontari can just beep herself in whenever she wants.

But he waits for Echo to send a message to his mother, and then has to wait another two minutes for her to respond. And it’s humiliating, because they all know she’s making him wait, they all know that he’s her son, the guards and minions milling about—

Well. They can think what they like.

He’ll know who’s mocked him. They’ll get theirs.

“She says you can come in,” Echo says, and Roan gives her an exaggerated, mocking bow before entering his childhood home.

For a given value of home. The entryway is classic McMansion, with wood floors and a chandelier, curving staircases on either side. He takes the stairs on the left, and then circles around, to where he knocks twice on his mother’s door and waiting thirty seconds—proper protocol—before letting himself in.

The living area of the mansion is a little smaller, but no less ornate. His mother has always had a thing for crystal sculptures, and they cover the room, giving it its weird, ethereal sparkle.

Nia is sprawled on the couch, in her pajamas, watching Game of Thrones.
Ha. Who knows her best, Ontari?

Ontari herself is nowhere to be seen. Thankful for small mercies, Roan helps himself to a pale blue armchair. It is not a comfortable one—made to look nice, but make sure your guests don’t stay too long.

“What do you want,” Nia says, not inflecting it like a question. She doesn’t take her eyes off of the screen, where dragons are fucking some losers up. Thank God dragons aren’t real. Roan doesn’t want her to get any ideas.

“That’s your response to a visit from your favorite son?”

“You’re my only son.” And what a tragedy that is, she doesn’t say, but she’s probably thinking it. Roan sighs, stretching out, adopting his most confident pose. Act like people want what you have, act like you know everything, and they’re more likely to come around.

It’s never worked on his mother, but that’s because she’s a cold-hearted bitch. Not because of a flaw in his technique.

“You should be a little happier to see me, mother. I come with great news.” That, at least, gets her to pause the TV, although that might be because he is annoying her and she wants to fully enjoy the episode once she is done reprimanding him. But he’ll take an opening where he can get it. “Little bird came to see me, told me that you were the mastermind behind our City of Light.”

She huffs, but sits up a little straighter. “Little bird?”

“The one that recently escaped the City’s—or your—clutches.” He’ll save the bit about the Commander for later. Never give up everything he has all at once. “She had some idea that since I was out of favor, I’d be willing to help bring you down.”

Nia looks directly at him for the first time since he came in—maybe the first time in a week. It always surprises him when he realizes that she’s getting old. That the Ice Queen of his youth is starting to melt a little, wrinkles forming on her face.

But her eyes are as cold as ever.

It’s easier, he thinks sometimes, that she never loved him. That there was no change. If he could remember her being soft, that might stay with him. But she’s like those wire monkeys, in those fucked up experiments: the ones the babies can never bond with.

“And what did you tell her?” she asks.

“I told her I’d be delighted to help her,” he says. “Obviously.”

This gets an approving nod. “Good.”

“Picked up a few other interesting things. Which I would also love to tell you. But before I do, I have to ask—” now he’s the one that straightens up, from his knowing pose to his asking pose. “Is it true? About the City of Light?”

She sniffs. “What, so you can go and tell your friends?”

“Well if it’s not true, then I’d like to tell them that it is, so that they’ll come sniffing around here and you’ll have just cause to start a war against Sky Crew. But if it is true, then congratulations, and obviously I want in.”
“You… want in.”

He spreads his hands. “Obviously. This is insane. A hive mind? Absolute control? No pain? You could take over the world with this. You could sell it to the army for millions of dollars, because they’ll be so afraid that you’ll sell it to other countries first, and then you tell other countries that the US has it and then of course they’re going to start bidding as well. You get a few different subsets out there, and let them fight it out. Of course I’d want to be involved in that. I know the winning side when I see it.”

She considers him.

It’s nothing she hadn’t thought of before, he knows her well enough for that. Clarke Griffin and Lexa might be worried about what it’s doing to Polis, but that’s always been the Commander’s flaw—she thinks of Polis first, Polis last, and so things can squeeze out the middle. Why control a gang war in one city when you can control gang wars between countries?

“You’ve put a lot of consideration into this.” She doesn’t say it like an accusation.

He shrugs. “It’s an exciting prospect.”

“You could tell them that the mainframe is in the basement.” She hasn’t exactly confirmed it, but she hasn’t denied it either, and he’s going to take that as a yes.

“I’m not sure she’d fall for that.”

The look is a little more accusatory. “You know Skylark well now, then?”

He thinks he’s got a pretty good sense of her at this point, yeah. “I know a few things. That’s the other bit of news I was going to tell you. I think she’s sleeping with the Commander.”

And that gets him definite interest. “Do tell.”

“She was there when I went in for a meeting about the Dropship building. I saw how they are together. The way they talk about each other. Some… physical evidence.”

Nia is smiling now. He’s not sure when he last saw her smile. “Do you know her angle?”

“Whose? It’s easy to see what Griffin gets out of it. Housing, resources. The illusion of influence. On the other side, it'll make it easier for Lexa to manipulate Sky Crew into doing what she wants. And some steady action on the side.” And then, to remind her that he hasn’t turned over a new leaf, that he’s still himself, he grins. “I’m not sure what game they’re playing, but I wouldn’t mind getting in on it.”

“Don’t be crude,” she says, which is a bit rich for someone who looks like she’d gotten three severed heads for Christmas— that is to say, absolutely delighted.

“I don’t think Skylark knows she’s being played,” he says. “At least, not yet. But she’s smart, she’ll get there. The fallout from that could be advantageous as well.”

“Send in Niylah to do a little digging,” Nia says. “Because it might just mean that Lexa gets another dedicated, brainwashed minion.”

Yes, that would be a shame.

“I’ll talk to her,” Roan says. “But first, don’t you think it’s time to talk to me?”
“So explain to me how telling Roan we were sleeping together is going to help, exactly?” Lexa would sound more intimidating if she wasn’t sucking a bitemark onto Clarke’s hip, Clarke’s fingers tangled in her hair. They’re back in Lexa’s room, on her giant giant bed, and it takes Clarke a moment to remember who Roan is and why he matters at all right now.

“I didn’t tell him,” she manages to gasp. “If I told him, he’d know something was up. Instead I let him think he’d figured it out. So he thinks he’s got something on us, and then he thinks, god, that, that Sky Crew must not have much to offer if you need an incentive, and it’s something he can give Nia to work his way in there, but there’s nothing he can prove if it gets out—”

“Oh, well,” Lexa says, pulling away. “If we want deniability, then—”

“Don’t you dare—” Clarke grabs her shoulder and rolls them over, straddling Lexa’s hips. Then, just to be a little shit, “I wasn’t done explaining to you the plan.” She slides a hand up under Lexa’s shirt, dragging her nails across the spot under Lexa’s breast— the whole body ripple she gets in response grinds their pelvises together.

“The plan?” Lexa asks, sounding far more composed than she looks.

“He’s going to go crazy trying to figure out what angles we’re playing. He doesn’t think you can do anything without one.” And hell, maybe she can’t, but Clarke knew that, and that’s why she’s protecting herself as best she can, which is not at all. “And I bet Nia thinks the same. At best they might think we’re both easily manipulated.”

“Not sure I want them to think that.” Lexa shoves a hand in between their bodies, fingers pressing at Clarke’s clit through her clothes. Clarke grinds against them, losing her grip on the ground for a moment, and ends up being shoved back in the air. Lexa’s face is so surprised that Clarke has to bite down on a giggle, but then her hip is caught in Lexa’s (beautiful, beautiful) hands and her back is on the bed again.

“Am I going to have to tie you down?” she asks, Commander-authority in her voice, and Jesus Crumping Christ, Clarke wants to eat her out. Wants to hold her down and bury her face between her legs until she’s dropped all her fake composure, until she’s a wreck, but she can’t because her face still hurts and in the meantime if Lexa wants to get creative, yeah, she’s game—

“Shut up,” Clarke gasps, yanking Lexa’s head down and doing her best to take out her frustrations on her lips, her tongue, look how good it’s going to be.

They don’t get entirely naked that time either, but they end up sprawled next to each other on the bed, a little out of breath.

“Shit,” Lexa manages.

Clarke mumbles an affirmative and buries her face in the pillow. “Unf.”

There’s a hand on her shoulder, lightly tracing it— she’s still wearing her shirt, but even when Lexa’s touch goes over the cloth, it makes her shiver. And she’s here in Lexa’s bed, in the apartment where Aden lives, and it’s incredibly important, all of a sudden, that Lexa know— “You
**Clarke:** “I’m not playing you, right?”

**Lexa:** “Lips at her neck. ‘Don’t be stupid.’

She doesn’t know if that means that Lexa knows, or that Lexa thinks she is playing games, or that Lexa is playing games, and Clarke will worry about it later but right now she’s floaty and happy and Lexa laughs, all of a sudden, bright and surprised. Clarke rolls over.

“What?”

“My hand.” Lexa bounces her hand a little on Clarke’s side. “It doesn’t weigh anything.”

“Oops.” Clarke isn’t light enough to be floating, but she imagines that the difference is still weird.

“You’re incredible.” Lexa is still smiling, and Clarke wants to draw her again, wants to get every expression. “I didn’t realize you had an anti-gravity bubble around you.”

“How do you think I can bounce with my clothes on?”

“Guess I never considered that.”

Just to mess with her, Clarke pulls down, and Lexa yelps as her hand drops. Her arm muscles strain so beautifully when she pulls it away. Clarke wants to lick them.

“Can you control how far it reaches?” far from being deterred, Lexa’s eyes seem brighter. “Like, could you slow someone down, if they were chasing you?”

“Never tried. Probably not.” Clarke props her head up on her hand, wincing when she brushes one of her burns by accident. “They’d be the same weight as me, and so if they were slow I’d also be slow. But I don’t think I can go farther than an inch, anyway.” Although she can target it—only weigh down one body part. She images being able to control things she’s not touching—lock people in place, send them flying—

Maybe if she’d spent more time at Mount Weather, they’d have gotten there.

Lexa might be able to see the turn in her thoughts, or maybe she’s just a giant perv, because her next question is, “if you get distracted, do you go down or up?”

“How do you mean?”

“Well say,” and then there’s a hand on Clarke’s side again. “Say, to pick a random example, I wanted to eat you out while sitting in my favorite armchair. Could you just sort of float above my face, or would my reward for doing a good job be you falling down and breaking both our necks?”

“Way to contrast the very sexy with the very not sexy.”

“Hey, I’m just curious. Gotta make plans.”

Clarke catches Lexa’s hand and, on impulse, sucks a finger into her mouth for a second before saying, “I thought I was the one with the plan.”

“Mm. It was a very good plan.”

Lexa’s phone rings then—not a song like Clarke’s, just a businesslike trill, and she groans for three seconds straight before answering it. “Indra.”
Indra’s voice, muffled, comes out: she sounds agitated, but when doesn’t she. Clarke hasn’t figured out the Degrees of Irateness yet. But whatever it is, it’s enough that Lexa sits up and starts adjusting her pants. “There in five.” She hangs up. “A guy from Bluelake just mugged a guy from Tond Circle and they’re about to start an incident.”

“It’s nine at night.”

“Well, when do you do your muggings?” Lexa makes a face. “Sorry.”

“No worries. I have to meet Roan in an hour.” Clarke would much rather bury her face in her pillow. “And I gotta make sure my backup is together.”

“Let me know what he says,” Lexa says, kissing her on the forehead, just above the burn, and then breezing out the door. Clarke tries not to touch the spot. It feels more intimate, somehow, than anything they’d done before.

*The Commander doesn’t keep anyone around who isn’t part of her grand plan.*

Christ.

She was only pretending that Roan had gotten to her, only pretending that it would be that easy to make her doubt. So why is it staying with her?

She knew what she was playing at. She knew what he was going to say.

She should be able to forget it.

---

The B Spot is a bar about a block down the road. The others had gone there, a couple times—Clarke hadn’t been able to go with them, because Skylark showing up with a group of athletic-looking people would have given up that game pretty quickly.

She’d been the one to point this out, when Octavia had invited her along.

Octavia had known the answer already. She’d been asking to be polite.

Clarke had told them to have a good time, and then sulked in her room for twenty minutes, watching her mom continue plodding through the Tsing files, before going up to Lexa’s.

The point is, she knows the bar, but she’s never been.

She hasn’t done anything in public, really, in weeks. She’s either being Skylark or ducking quickly into chauffeured cars, or meeting with her own or Coalition people in the Grounder building. How the hell is she supposed to just—

*A vigilante walks into a bar…*

Maybe someone will try and fight her.

She could do with a good fight.
But Monty and Harper are going to be there, and Octavia is going to lurk in a corner, and if she gets into a fight they’ll want to back her up and then their covers will be blown. So, no fighting.

Maybe the word about her face hasn’t gotten out of Arkadia, and they’ll look away from her burns out of politeness and thus not notice her resemblance to Clarke Griffin. The City of Light isn’t as prominent downtown as it is in Arkadia and Mechawood.

She keeps her hood up anyway when she goes in, weaving around the small tables to the bar. The place is set up like a basement tavern that doubles as a hookup spot— lots of booths, and small tables forcing people close to each other. It makes her skin itch.

Harper and Monty are in the corner, blocking off an empty table for her— they’re laughing over something, but they’re not on comms, so Clarke doesn’t know what the joke was.

They look happy. They look like two young people in a bar. They look like they haven’t left battlefields behind them and bodies in their wake.

“Whatever’s on tap,” Clarke tells the bartender. The smart thing to do would be to keep her head down, but she can’t see when she does that, and so instead she gets to watch him look at her, then away, then back at her, then away, then settle at a point above her head. Her buzzer doesn’t go off.

Score one for Discomfort for Deformity.

He doesn’t ask for ID, and she retreats to the corner, only nodding at Harper and Monty in the polite way one is supposed to do when stepping around a stranger’s chair.

And then she sits with her back to the room, trusting the other three to watch out for her. It’s a better plan— fewer people to see her face— but it makes her neck itch.

“Can I have some of your beer?” Octavia asks. The corner is dark enough that Clarke can’t even see her outline.

“Floating beer is a no,” she says back, taking a gulp so that it will look like she isn’t talking to the wall.

It’s ten after. There’s no sign of Roan.

The beer is terrible.

“Why can’t Jedis email photos?” Monty asks from behind her. Harper groans.

“Why?”

“Because attachments are forbidden!”

“Boo!”

Clarke wants to turn around. She doesn’t turn around.

“There’s a girl headed our way. Blonde, no visible weapons but her shirt is baggy enough that there could be some.”

Clarke waits. Around her, the bar goes a little quieter, as Harper muffles the area to keep out curious ears.

And then the chair next to her is being pulled out, and a woman sits down, dropping her elbows on
the table and folding her hands under her chin. “The Strider look is really working for you.”

Clarke blinks. “Excuse me?”

“Alone and brooding in the corner with your hood up. It works for you.” The girl winks, leaning closer, and Clarke tries not to look too obviously confused. Is this secretly a gay bar? Does she look like someone who has just been in bed with another woman? Is that noise a chair being moved, or Octavia trying not to cackle? “Pretend I’m seducing you,” the girl says, and Clarke jumps, leaning away.

She has no idea how to respond right now.

Also, pretend?

“Jumpy. I can work with that. I’m Niylah.” Niylah is pretty— hair pulled back in an intricate braid, perfectly symmetrical eyeliner. Her face is the same shape as Lexa’s, and wow, Clarke has it worse than she thought. Niylah reaches out, gently touching the top of Clarke’s hand. She resists the urge to yank it away. “Ms. Frost sent me.”

She could smash her mug into Niylah’s face and that would distract her long enough for Octavia to get a dart in her neck—

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Well, Ms. Frost sent me, but Roan spoke to me afterwards. Changed the mission. I was just supposed to test the waters. Stop looking like you’re trying to fight me and more like you want to kiss me, okay?”

“I don’t want to kiss you,” Clarke hisses back. Niylah rolls her eyes.

“Spies. Everywhere. Go along with it.”

Clarke tries to look relaxed. She isn’t sure she’s doing a good job.

“Also, is that Shadow giggling behind me?”

Clarke shoots a glare to the wall. “You must be imagining things. What did Roan say?”

Niylah picks up her hand and flips it over, running her fingertips along her palm. Then, quick as a flash, she drops a folded piece of paper out of her sleeve. “A few things. Wanna get out of here?”

Clarke puts the paper in her pocket as she takes another gulp of beer. “No.”

“You’re a pain in the ass, you know that?”

“You’re working for someone who had me tortured. What were you expecting?”

Eyes on her burns are something she’s going to have to get used to. Can’t hide. She thought she was doing decently at hiding so far, but her buzzer starts to go off— faintly. She looks down at her beer.

“No, I’m working for Roan. I’ve got no love for the Ice Queen either.”

She could be saying anything, especially if she’s Nia’s go-to for honeytraps. Is that like prostitution? Disgust curls in Clarke’s gut, and while she’s sure she wouldn’t have slept with Niylah anyway, she hates the entire concept.
“Tell Roan he’s very funny,” Clarke says. “Feel free to use as much sarcasm as you think you can get away with. And I’m not leaving with you, I don’t want Nia to think I’m that easy.”

Niylah shrugs. “Should I tell her that you were resistant, but possibly amenable to future flirtation?”

“Tell her whatever you want.” This beer really is terrible. She can’t imagine drinking enough of it to actually get drunk. “Well, whatever will make her the happiest.”

Hurt and disappointment spread across Niylah’s face, and if Clarke hadn’t known better, she’d have believed it was genuine. “See you around.”

And then she wanders off back towards the bar, for all the world looking like she’s after better prospects.

“Oh my god,” Octavia hisses, and there are four layers of mirth in her voice. “That was the greatest thing that’s ever happened in my entire life.”

“Shut up.” Clarke picks up the beer again. “Oh my god.”

Monty and Harper are giggling, too.

“Most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” Harper says, ostensibly to Monty— which means Clarke can’t glare at her. Instead she makes herself drink at least half the beer before making her way back to the door. She keeps to the edges, and if someone recognizes her, they don’t make a fuss, although one guy does a double-take. Fine. Whatever. She’s got better things to worry about than what her face looks like or if girls like her back. The buzzing doesn’t get stronger. But Nia had expected her to be here, anyway.

The night outside is colder than the warmth of the bar, and she takes a moment to adjust. There’s no one around and Octavia doesn’t bother trying to muffle her laughter.

“Try and look seduced,” she says, almost wheezing.

“I’m glad that was entertaining for you.” It is a little funny, in retrospect. But Clarke’s face is still burning. And they aren’t being followed, at least as far as she can tell, but she leads Octavia in laps around the blocks and up a couple fire escapes just to make extra sure they’re in the clear before ducking back down into the parking garage.

“The other two looked like they were having a good time,” she says when they reach the elevator, careful to avoid their names more out of habit than any real worry about security. Their faces are on camera, after all. “Is that a thing?”

“Hell if I know,” Octavia says. “They’ve been sort of bouncing around each other for a while. What’d the note say?”

Only this:

*It’s a demo. Poss 4 pent/lang.*
btw, I entered as a contributor for graphics and video in the fandomtrumpshate auction-- my page is here. You should definitely check out the writers/artists involved if you have the time/money/inclination, it's a pretty cool project.

Also, I'm not the only one that noticed how much Niylah looked like Lexa, right? They have different hair, obv, but their face and eyes are real similar.
Alexis Heda Goes to Washington, part 1

Chapter Summary

In another life, Lexa would start and stop wars for Clarke.
In this life, Lexa cannot let herself be so weak.
In this life, Lexa has responsibilities to too many people.
In this life, Lexa gives her city everything. She gives and gives and gives and she can keep the scraps, but Clarke isn’t a scrap. Clarke is—Clarke.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Excuse me one moment,” Lexa says when she answers the phone. It’s her perfectly stiff commander voice, which doesn’t bode well for whatever she’s dealing with right now. Then, more muffled—“Carry on without me please.”

Octavia leans in next to Clarke, putting her ear on the phone. Clarke shoves her, Octavia shoves back, and they’re having a slight shoving match in the elevator in front of Kenny the Security Guy and everyone when Lexa picks up again.

“Mediation’s going well, then?” Clarke asks.

A rather undignified snort comes through the line, so Clarke can only assume Lexa has made it somewhere private. Probably out of the conference room and into her office. “It’s looking like they’re going to make a Vine of the victim’s mother punching the assailant, for everyone else to watch over and over until they feel justice has been done.”

“An eye for an eye, then.”

The elevator doors open, and Clarke and Octavia shuffle over to their apartment. Octavia then proceeds to follow Clarke into their room, but that’s good, that’s fine, Octavia also had eyes on the situation and might have noticed something that Clarke didn’t. It only makes sense. Plus it’s Octavia’s room too.

“Blood must have blood,” Lexa says, with false gravitas. “Did you meet Roan?”

Here comes the fun part. “No. He sent a woman to pass on a message.”

Octavia shoves her mouth next to the phone. “And to seduce Clarke.”

Clarke pushes her again. “One moment, I’m putting you on speaker phone. It seems Shadow has something to contribute.” And that’ll free up her hands. She’s already grabbed a pencil and paper, trying to draw Niylah as best she can before her face slips away. Lexa might recognize her. There might be something else at work here, and it’ll give her an excuse not to look at Octavia. She’d drawn Indra and Gustus like this too, back—god, only a couple of months ago.

It’s been a long, long spring.

She hopes that Sky Crew had burned those drawings with other information before they left.
Although maybe the picture of Gustus could be salvaged. Maybe Lexa would want it. But probably not. Lexa doesn’t like looking back. His eyes are already going to haunt her for the rest of her life, just like Finn’s will haunt Clarke’s. They learn to live around the empty spots. It’s how they survive.

“Roan sent a woman to seduce Clarke?” Lexa asks, with what Clarke really hopes is jealousy in her voice. It might be amusement, though.

“No, Nia sent a woman to seduce me.” Clarke sketches out the edges of Niylah’s face. “Then Roan intercepted her and gave her the message for us, so it looks like he is playing the triple-agent.”

“If Nia sent a woman to seduce you then that means that Roan is behaving how we thought he would,” Lexa says. Niylah’s face and Lexa’s faces really were a very similar shape.

“Wait, why does Nia think that you’re into girls?” Octavia hisses.

Clarke raises an eyebrow. “Because I am?”

“How long have you been into girls?” This time, it’s not a whisper. Lexa snickers.

Clarke raises the other eyebrow. “Forever?” She considers making a joke along the lines of ‘since Faith showed up on Buffy when I was an impressionable child,’ but dark, curly-haired women with superpowers who can kick all sorts of ass might hit a little close to home. Then, louder, “The note says that it’s a demo, ‘poss for pent/lang’…. Pentagon and Langley?”

“It would make sense,” Lexa says. “They’d definitely be interested. I have a contact at the Pentagon, I can go down there. We’d have to keep that under wraps so that Nia doesn’t find out… means I’d have to drive.”

“That’s a long time for no one to notice you’re gone,” Octavia points out. “You can’t sneak onto a plane, or something?”

“Not since the Underwear Bomber. I’ll have to figure out… I can’t take Indra, she’ll have to act like I’m still here… Anya, maybe, but everyone knows she’s with me.”

“My mom has a rental she needs to return.” It comes out before Clarke thinks it through. “She could drive, and if you pretended to sleep in the back seat, you’d be less likely to get caught by the traffic cameras.” She’d been focusing on Niylah’s cheekbones, but the sudden silence and Octavia’s pointed stare make her look up.

“Just to be clear,” Lexa says slowly, “you want me to drive thirty hours, round trip, with your mother.”

Octavia is doing something with her eyebrows that Clarke is having a hard time interpreting.

“Want is not the word I’d use,” she adds hastily, before she psychs herself out too much. “But it’d make sense, logistically. We’ve been careful to not let her be connected to us, she probably needs to make an appearance to make people less suspicious—”

“And this is not in any way because you don’t want her hovering?” Octavia asks.

No. Of course not. Clarke has had at least two Real Conversations with her in the last couple weeks, and Abby’s mostly been thinking of increasingly creative ways to swear at the Tsing papers. She’s reported a lot of what makes their brains adapt to their new abilities, but there’s nothing about external mind control. Also, there’s a chance that she keeps giving Clarke concerned
looks, and trying to help her when she gets injured, and Clarke has been on her own so much that she just balks at it all.

Maybe.

“No,” she says, though she’s given herself away by the pause.

“Ooohkay.” Lexa clears her throat. “And… Python would be a great asset on this trip as well.”

She’s not asking permission, because to do so would be to concede power, but she’s not ordering Clarke either, because to do so would assume authority.

It’s a weird thing for Clarke to find endearing. But she does.

“I’ll ask him,” she says. Lexa should ask him, really— Monty doesn’t follow interpersonal politics the way Clarke does, the way Lexa does— so he won’t see any concession in her asking instead of telling. But others might.

“Okay. We’ll need to figure out… I’ll wrap up in here, and then come down there in twenty minutes?”

If she’s really dedicated, maybe. “Lexa, it’s past midnight.”

“Is it?”

Clarke resists the urge to faceplant into a pillow. She’s still wearing her going-to-the-bar makeup.

“Everyone’s probably awake anyway,” Octavia points out. “If they have to drive the whole way, they should start as soon as possible— it means that they’ll be able to have the meeting a full day earlier, and we know how much shit can go wrong in a day around here.”

Knock on wood.

“Good point,” Clarke says. “I’ll go… wake my mom up.”

“Okay,” Lexa says. “See you soon.” She hesitates, and Clarke hesitates, and then Lexa hangs up and the line beeps at them.

Right.

Clarke puts the drawing of Niylah on the bed, and stands.

“Sooollll,” Octavia says, causing her to pause. “Are you and Lexa a couple?”

That’s… an interesting question. One that doesn’t have a clear answer. But it’s not a lie, when Clarke says “no.”

“Are you sleeping together?”

Less ambiguous. More direct. Why is she always confronted about this here, in her own room? It’s almost funny, isn’t it. And she could lie, she could lie and then feel that small betrayal crushing her or she could just— “Yes.”

“Right.” Octavia nods a few times, fists clenched. “Right. How long?”

If she’s mad about semi-secret sex partners, she’s a giant hypocrite. “A bit. Come on, we can talk
“No. Everything is going to get crazy later and you’ll dodge and just— how long, Clarke?”

It’s hard to remember, the last time she didn’t tell Octavia something. Even when she’s tried to keep secrets, it hasn’t worked— everyone else might fall for something, go with half-filled answers, but not O. And Clarke wants to tell her, wants to spill out the whole saga, wants to ask for advice like they’re civilians. “Since after Mount Weather. I went up to talk to her after we got back.”

Octavia is still nodding. Slowly. But she’s locked onto something. “Is that why she’s letting us stay here?”

What? Clarke jerks back. “No. No. We were allies before— before. That’s not…” is Octavia worried about her? It’s a weirdly comforting thought.

“You’re sure? This—” O waves a hand, indicating the room they share, the stupid hotel wallpaper, the personal items that have been piling up on their respective sides over the last few weeks. “This isn’t conditional on you putting out?”

“Jesus. No.” That much, at least, she is sure of.

“Are you lying?”

“No.” Clarke looks her in the eye, maybe for the first time since Niylah. “No. I’m not. That’s not what’s happening.” Because it is the kind of thing she would do, isn’t it? Clarke has been known to be that manipulative, or that self-sacrificing. But an alliance cracking because of their personal problems— that’s not who Lexa is. It’s not who Clarke is.

“Okay.” Octavia finally stops nodding. “Okay then.”

“That’s it?” That can’t be it.

“Just… be careful.”

Too late for that.

Clarke goes to wake Abby and Raven.

By the time Lexa sends the ambassadors home, appoints a third party to record the Vine of Humiliation, and swings by her apartment to change her clothes-slash-stare wistfully at Aden’s sleeping form, the apartment Sky Crew have dedicated as Headquarters is in full motion. Goggles, still wrapped in bandages and with a limited range of motion, has nonetheless acquired a stash of wigs from somewhere— Lexa suspects Arty— and is sorting them with a look of utmost concentration. Wire is trying to rub a pillow crease off her cheek while she checks a box of bugs.

Homer is trying to keep both Python and Abby within arms reach. It seems to be helping his anxiety, and increasing theirs.
“You can do three days,” Python says, batting Homer’s arm away as he reaches out for a bro-shoulder-clap. “I’ve seen you find a guy after a month. Hey, Commander. Hear we’re gonna be carpool buddies.”

Homer does not offer her a bro-hug. Thank God.

“Yeah,” she manages. “Anya and Indra are coming by in a few, can one of you guys let them in? I need to talk to—”

“—Yeah, Clarke’s in the kitchen,” Homer says.

Right. Lexa steps around Shadow, who is staring at her a little more intensely than is comfortable, and through the doorway into the kitchen. She has to go around the counter into the U-shaped nook before she sees Clarke, standing over the sink— there’s a glass in her hand, but the water is running over the top.

“Clarke,” Lexa says quietly as she can. She’d been intending not to surprise her, but she fails—Clarke jumps, knocking the glass against the fake-marble of the countertop, spilling it everywhere.

“Shit! Sorry. Shit!”

Lexa snags a dish towel and gently pushes her out of the way, sopping up the water. “Are you alright?” She’s not alright, obviously, but she might not want to talk about it. It’s not hard to guess what’s going on.

“Yeah. I just— I spent all this time trying to keep my mom out of danger, and now I’m asking her to do this, and she said yes, like, right away, and—”

“Hey.” Lexa catches the hand that had started to shake, wrapping it in her own. “I’m not going to let anything happen to her.” She wants to promise. She can’t promise.

In a different life, Lexa can see her giving Clarke everything. All of herself and everything she has and even if Clarke could only return scraps, it would be okay. If Clarke took all of her and left her empty, it would be okay, because she would be there. In another life, Lexa would start and stop wars for Clarke.

In this life, Lexa cannot let herself be so weak.

In this life, Lexa has responsibilities to too many people.

In this life, Lexa gives her city everything. She gives and gives and gives and she can keep the scraps, but Clarke isn’t a scrap. Clarke is— Clarke.

And so she can’t promise.

She kisses her though, not letting go of her hand, trying to make her understand—

(How can she, when Lexa doesn’t quite understand herself?)

And Clarke kisses her back, hand on the side of her face—

That’s how Indra and Anya find them. Both of their expressions would look blank, to an outside observer, but Lexa knows them— knows that Anya wants to laugh (it’s there in her forehead, in the line next to her eye) and Indra thinks this is some gay white bullshit that she is not paid enough to deal with (it’s in the twitch of her finger, the tightness of her mouth.) They both stare at Clarke as
Lexa steps away, and Clarke, to her credit, stares back.

Anya is not an easy person to win a staring contest with.

“Oh, good,” Lexa says, adopting a carelessness that she’s sure everyone can see through. “Is anyone else in earshot?”

“You didn’t think to check that?” Indra asks. The snark is going to be insane for the next two years, at least, if they survive this.

“We’re okay,” Anya says. She doesn’t whack Indra upside the head— but Lexa has the sense that she will, later, during one of their drunken board game nights that they think Lexa doesn’t know about.

“Right.” She takes a second to clear her throat. Something goes BANG in the living room, but Clarke only rolls her eyes, so they can probably assume it’s fine. “You know I trust Titus and Kenny, but— you’re the only other people that know about Aden.” She’d forgotten, for a second, that Gustus is dead. “This is not part of your official duties, so you don’t have to— but as a favor, if you can check on him, a couple times, it’d probably make him feel less abandoned.” And her less terrified. She doesn’t leave the city. She never leaves the city. Polis was her first love, and Polis is who she is. There have been times where she hasn’t come home for days in a row, but that’s different.

“Of course,” Clarke says, after a pause. “Does he know, or—”

“No. Tell him I’m… at the office. He’ll probably figure it out, but I don’t want Titus or Kenny to.” Kenny’s used to her not coming through the door for long periods of time.

“I can come with you,” Anya says. And she could— Becca already knows who she is, and then she wouldn’t be with just Sky Crew, which is clearly making them both nervous. But—

“No, I need you here. If something happens…” And they always say something or anything when they mean death. If Anything happens to me. If Something happens to her. “If Nia gets up to anything, I need you guys here.” She’s relaying her texts through the building, so they should be able to communicate, but they’ll still have to be careful.

Everyone nods, then nods some more. There are a dozen conversations waiting to be had, that can’t be had here, and they could go in all directions— Lexa squeezes Clarke’s shoulder for a moment before returning to the living room.

Behind her, Anya and Indra are both staring at Clarke. Clarke continues to stare back. The shaken girl from just a few minutes ago is gone, replaced by conviction and a statue-like stillness.

Good to see them all getting along.

“Commander!” Goggles waves a hand at her from the couch. “Can you try this on?”

What he gives her a wig. It’s blue, although in the interests of authenticity, there is a good inch of fake root showing at the top.

“Um,” Lexa says.

“It’s for if you have to stop in a gas station. All they’ll see is how scandalizing your hair is, not your face, see?”
Yeah. Sure. She pulls her hair back and tugs the wig on over it, realizing as she does so that this might have just been to see if she’d wear it, but nobody snaps a picture, or seems to care. “It’s fine.”

“Cool.” He takes it when she hands it back to him, and then proceeds to throw it at Python with a “Heads up!”

Python tries to catch it without looking— he fails, and it hits him in the face.

Yay.

The last time she woke up, it had been before they met with Roan. Clarke’s face had been buried in the pit of her elbow, and the world had been a different place.

Now she’s in a car, meetings delegated or rearranged, and she’s going to have to literally confront her past.

In the front seat, Abby’s knucks are tight on the steering wheel: Lexa wants to talk to her, if only to understand the woman who raised Clarke, and Clarke herself— and because she can’t remember her own mother, she wants to know what that relationship is like. But between them will always be Clarke’s arrest and her father’s death, the event that ruined Abby’s life, and led to nothing but good for Lexa’s. There’s no way to reconcile that.

So she keeps quiet, keeps her eyes on her phone.

Next to her, Python has pulled a hat down over his face. She’d thought he had fallen asleep— his cheek is pressed against the window, his mouth hanging open— but his fingers are moving on some device in his palm. Just visible in the orange light of the passing streetlamps.

They’ll be out of the city soon. Hours and hours of highway. If they take turns driving, they can be in Arlington by the afternoon.

Lexa’s used to operating on little to no sleep. She doesn’t know if it’s part of her body’s regenerative powers, or if she’s just one of the lucky ones. But if she’s going to talk to Becca, she should prepare. A speech. Evidence. Carefully chosen threats.

And she’s going to have to be awake.

Still, she waits until they’ve left Polis far behind before she lets herself fall asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the minichapter. I’ve spent so long writing the rest of this in my head that sometimes I forget that doesn’t count as actual writing time. But the senior thesis and political bullshit stops for no fic, unfortunately.
Alexis Heda Goes to Washington, part 2

Chapter Summary

It had been quiet for hours before that. Not really the NPR or car game crowd— not that there’s really anything to I Spy in the car. I Spy the Commander pretending she isn’t asleep. I Spy Monty’s bugs. I Spy a Stressed Out Mom.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Every time they made fiddled with Monty’s brain, every time they went in with their programs and wires and who the fuck knows what, they’d asked him how he felt. What he saw. What had changed.

And he’d told them. When the drugs or the headaches had worn off, he’d looked at the world and tried to grasp the difference.

What they’d wanted to know is if they could force learning. Increase pattern recognition skills and language comprehension, to the point that he could look at strings of ones and zeroes and know that Tsing, thinking she was being clever, had plugged the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain into a binary translator.

What they’d wanted to know is if they could break down digitized walls. If instead of spending weeks trying to break into a site or plant a bug, they could have some magic savant technopath hokey pokey his way in. If, someday, they could control the internet and everything stored on it.

It was like learning to read.

Monty had always been good at computers. He’d gotten arrested because he was good at computers. But it’s like knowing the alphabet verses being fluent in Latin: the difference between memorizing a definition of the word, and understanding the syllables and roots that make it up, being able to break it apart and put it together in a new way, understanding things he’s never seen before—

“Gas station in five miles,” Abby says. “Anyone need to use the bathroom?”

It had been quiet for hours before that. They're not really the NPR or car game crowd— not that there’s really anything to I Spy in the car. I Spy the Commander pretending she isn’t asleep. I Spy Monty’s bugs. I Spy a Stressed Out Mom.

“No,” he says finally, when Lexa doesn’t speak up. “Jasper gave me his entire cookie stash, if anyone’s hungry.” It had been incredibly sweet, and said more than anything how upset Jasper was at being left behind. They don’t split up, Jasper and Monty— they haven’t since they were shoved in a jail cell together, and Jasper had tried to convince him that he was in for mass murder and shouldn’t be messed with. After they rescued Clarke and Murphy, when he saw Jasper being carried in by Harper and Miller, Monty had—

Monty had—
He shouldn’t think about it. Can’t think about it. He knows that there have been worse nights in his life: when Maya died, when Charlotte died, when Finn died. But it was hard not to look at his friend and think: it’s this one. This is it. The reason he’d gotten away with only a sprained arm was because his injuries had been given to his best friend instead.

“Python!” Abby says sharply, and it takes him a moment to remember— he’d said Jasper’s name, but—


Since he’d said it That Night.

Unless— “Do you know all our names?” Monty asks. Emerson did, after all, and they’ve got to be written down somewhere.

“No.”

“Are you lying?”

Lexa rolls her head around to look him in the eye. It is not a comfortable experience, being the focus of that stare. He doesn’t know how Clarke does it. “No,” she says again. “I know Clarke, I know Jasper, I know Wells, obviously, and Dr. Griffin. If Shadow’s name is Olivia, then I know it, but if it’s not— ah, it’s not.” Monty doesn’t know what in his face gave him away, but he’s going to have to do a lot of soul searching on it.

He rolls one of his bugs between his fingers, thinking on it. If she knows Jasper, then it’s only a short jump to him, and they’re going to talk with someone in government, who might have access to all the classified Mount Weather files anyway.

“I’m Monty,” he says finally.

It’s hard to be sure, but he thinks he’s surprised her.

“Nice to meet you, Monty,” she says. Then— “I can drive if you want to take a nap, Dr. Griffin. We’re far enough out of the city now.”

Abby does not tell Lexa to call her by her first name. Instead she turns on the indicator and pulls off the highway. “Just don’t get pulled over, I’m technically the only one allowed to drive this.”

“Feel free to wear the wig,” Monty adds. “Siren really wants a picture.” And he really wants to make Harper smile. He pretends, sometimes, that his mind is all logical code, but then he gets weird if-then-else loops that go If Harper touches you then get all warm and happy else feel weirdly sad and confused.

Lexa doesn’t respond.

Abby moves to the passenger seat, leaving Monty feeling a bit like the child in this scenario.

But with the backseat to himself, he can stretch. So he adjusts, sprawling across the entire backseat, and takes a nap.
Using Abby’s condo as a base seems like the way for either the Ice Queen’s spies to track them down, or for the feds to come and arrest them all. But, Lexa points out, Monty is supposed to scramble their location anyway—and Nia shouldn’t even know that Abby is involved in any of this.

Monty figures that she just didn’t want to go to a hotel.

Abby’s place is nice enough. Smallish. Full of pictures and mismatched furniture and very clearly lived in, long term, with no fear that she’s going to have to pack up and run. Lexa disappears into the bathroom in an attempt to look more professional and less sleep deprived, leaving Monty and Abby to start clearing space for his bag of computers.

He hasn’t really been alone with her.

It’s kind of weird.

Okay. It’s super weird.

All of Sky Crew has or had parents in the abstract sense. Monty’s mom had moved while he was in jail, taking up soy farming where nobody asked her about her wayward son. They haven’t talked in years. Connor goes home once in a while and comes back with cookies and stories of someone else’s life. The less said about Harper’s family, the better.

But then there’s Clarke, and here is evidence that the Clarke he knows isn’t the Clarke she used to be. Monty looks at the furniture and wonders if Clarke ever fell asleep here during bad movies, or sat there coloring, with no idea how her life was going to turn out. It makes him sad, in an abstract sense.

“Clarke never lived here,” Abby says, like she was reading his mind. His curiosity was probably obvious. “I moved, after. You know. Needed a smaller place. Jake had life insurance, but—” she stops. “Anyway. I made sure it had an extra room, just in case she— so some of her old stuff is in there. We should email her and see if she wants us to bring any of it back.”

Or for Monty to tease her about what fourteen-year-old Clarke had been into. What if she’s got, like, Avril Lavigne or Fergie posters, or something? It would only be his duty to bring back evidence.

“Okay,” he says, when he realizes Abby wants a response.

He’s brought a variety of devices for Lexa to wear, and starts arranging them on the table by size as he waits for her to come back. He’s got four laptops in his bag, and one desktop, and he looks out the window to make sure there isn’t going to be any glare when he sees a person on the sidewalk. They aren’t doing anything suspicious—it’s a man, he thinks, just walking along minding his own business, but—

“What are we going to do if someone saw us come in? Your neighbors, I mean.”

Abby shrugs. “I told them I had a family emergency. We’ll just say you’re, I don’t know. My niece and nephew, or something.”

“Yes, the Commander and I really look like siblings.”

Another shrug. “People adopt. Or you could be my niece and her boyfriend.”
Abort, abort, abort. “Even fewer people would believe we’re dating.”

“I’m way too scary for you,” Lexa says, and she really could have picked a better time to show up. Her hair is still wet, and her business pants really clash with the towel she’s got wrapped around her upper half. Brandishing a button-up shirt, she asks Abby if she has an iron.

Monty is left with her suit jacket, a bunch of bugs to sneak into it, and an image of the Commander ironing shirtless that is mostly just terrifying.

If Miller is right, though, Clarke might like to hear about it.

There’s no accounting for taste.

His bugs should pick up wifi signals and relay them back to his computers, but he has to assume that she’s going to have to go through a metal detector or scanner of some sort. So he’s disguised some of them as bits of crumpled foil, like from a candy wrapper. He’s also gone with the classics and hid a couple in pens. A few in hair bands, for either hair or wrist use.

It’ll be fine.

They’re just spying on the Pentagon.

No way that could go wrong.

Lexa texts them when she’s about to go in—a nondescript c u later. It’s the cue for Monty to activate his bugs, and then—what the hell—turn the sound on.

There’s the professional clip-clop of Lexa’s shoes on the pavement. The murmuring of voices. Abby looks at him, eyebrows raised.

“I thought we weren’t getting sound.”

Yes, he had implied that, hadn’t he? “Better safe than sorry,” he says. “If something happens, we might only have minutes to prepare.” Like Lexa selling them out, or her contact already being chipped, or one of the other eighteen deadly scenarios he’s been generating as a way to plan contingencies.

The first few signals start coming in—Lexa’s passed reception—and he starts running decryption on them. He doesn’t think that ‘Nancy iPhone’ is going to be full of classified data, but better safe. There’s a quiet exchange—elevator, he thinks—and then a door and a knock—

“Tommy I thought I—” from an unfamiliar voice. Then silence.

“Hello, Becca,” Lexa says.

Monty sets up a second laptop to focus on Becca’s office. No point in bogging down one machine when he can surround himself with computers and look cool. Abby helps herself to some of Jasper’s cookies, chewing with a gravitas that Monty is feeling curling in his stomach. Lexa is in. This is all very, very real.
“Alexis,” Becca says. Then— “By all means, make yourself comfortable.”

“It’s Lexa, now.”

“I’ve heard.”

When Lexa said she had a contact at the Pentagon, she hadn’t said their relationship was this fraught. But she’s got to stay in the building for as long as possible, because Monty is going to need some time here.

“I do have a working assistant, you know. You could have made an appointment. I could have been in with the Joint Chiefs.”

“Please. You think I think the Chiefs would have come to your office?”

“Point. So please, let me know what I can do for you. Delinquents giving you trouble?”

What.

“Excuse me?” Lexa asks, and she doesn’t sound thrown, but Monty sure as hell is: he and Abby exchange a wide-eyed look, and he has the urge to hug one of the sofa cushions. But he doesn’t, because he’s too busy hacking into a very secure government system and ho boy could this get him arrested times a million.

He compromises by taking a cookie of his own.

“Clarke Griffin and her friends. They seem to have moved in with you. Bit ironic, isn’t it, considering that it’s your fault she was arrested and her father was killed.”

Abby has gone very, very still next to him, her fingers twisted into a knot. Her cookie sits, half eaten and forgotten.

“The project wasn’t mine,” Lexa says. “Fault is not the word I would use.”

“No, but she would have destroyed your little dictatorship. Wouldn’t have been good for you. Does she know?”

“She knows.”

Clarke knows?

“Dangerous thing, knowing.”

“Listen to me very carefully.” Lexa is using a voice Monty hasn’t heard since— well, maybe Mount Weather. “If you come after Clarke, if you go near her, I ruin you. I will ruin your career, and every project you’ve ever touched. Are we clear?”

Yeah, Miller was definitely on to something.

Abby relaxes, though. Monty settles for not speaking, because he doesn’t know what he would say. Sucks about your husband? The time since they lost Finn has been the longest Monty has gone without losing someone he cared about since he was in jail. He’s been trying to forget how it feels. How to relate.

“Is it too late for the talk?” Becca sounds far more amused than Monty would be if he had just been threatened by the Commander, and he likes to think he’s hard to scare. “Can I get you a
brochure on the importance of dental dams?”

Now Monty really, really doesn’t want to look at Abby.

“It’s not like that,” Lexa says, a little too sharply.

“No? Then the same threat doesn’t stand for the rest of her little gang?”

“No, it doesn’t.” And Monty is about to be real offended when Lexa continues—“because if anything happens to them, Clarke will destroy you. I’ll just watch. And occasionally fulfill sidekick duties.”

What the actual fuck is happening.

“Hmm,” Becca says, and Monty is imagining her as an overly severe, Amanda Waller type. He’s also imagining the Commander as a sidekick. Skylark and Susan doesn’t sound very catchy. Then again, he still thinks Susan is a stupid superhero name in the first place.

“Much fun as it is to catch up, though, I’m here about the City of Light.”

“…Paris?”

“What? No.”

“Hovhaness’s symphony?”

There’s a smack, and Monty jumps, before realizing that it must have been Lexa’s hand on a desk. What do those peoples’ desks look like? Oak? Plastic? He bites into a cookie, careful not to get crumbs on any of the computers desperately whirring away. “You’re watching Polis closely enough to speculate on my sex life, and you’re claiming you haven’t noticed the computer program that can control peoples’ minds?”

“Ah.”

“Yeah.”

“That.”

“Yeah.”

Silence. Monty shouldn’t be listening. He should be relaxing into the trance-like state that makes it easier to order the world, where he can direct signals and open accounts with barely a thought—but he’s not a machine. He’s reminded of this every time Harper smiles at him or Jasper gives him a high-five and his heart thumps away away and his if-then loops short-circuit into a string of warm chest feelings. And he’s remembering that now, when he’s curious and nosy.

“We heard that there might be an attempt to sell it to you. That Polis was being used as a demonstration of its potential.”

“Did you,” Becca says, as Monty finally locates the email account listed under Pramhed, Rebecca. A quick scan reveals nothing from anyone named Frost or Emerson, but that doesn’t mean anything, really.

“It would make sense. It’s a great weapon. Soldiers that don’t feel pain, entirely controlled.” And Lexa could do to sound less like she’s making a sales pitch. “You plant a few of those in high-risk areas and you get terrorists turning themselves in while telling you everything they know. Human
perfection through science. I figured it might be your area.”

He ignores everything that doesn’t look relevant. He doesn’t want to know, but also, he really doesn’t care. There’s some project files, and if the Frosts had sent anything over, it might be in here— Monty scans for anything that might look related.

“I don’t think I have to tell you that if you pass, the next place they look will be China, or Russia. And depending on who wins the presidential race, one of them will be our best friend, and one will be our enemy.”

“And if we get it first?” Becca asks.

“Then you’ll really be answering to Frost, and the country’s enemies will get it anyway. They always do. Whole world of pod people with no free will, and one or two people controlling them all. And that person probably won’t be someone with morals. I don’t have to tell you that this is dangerous as hell, and goes against everything you’re supposed to protect, right?”

“No.” Monty lets out a bit of a sigh at Becca’s response. Although it could be a lie. He can picture her now, though— there’s an ID photo in her file. A dark haired woman with pronounced cheekbones. He sinks back into the code, into a more ordered world where he can control the information flow like Harper does sound, calling it to him— designs for weapons he never wants to see again, a computer virus destined for— Iran? Awkward— and deeper until— there! A study about programming the human mind’s reactions to stimuli.

“—A project, a long time ago,” Becca is saying.

So maybe she’ll just… spill the beans.

“I worked on a device that could control neural impulses. It was supposed to help—”

“It didn’t,” Lexa says.

First author on the study is Lorelei Sarin.

Monty swings over to the other computer to pull up marriage records.

“But the backers in government got replaced in ‘09, and my partner went off to work in the private sector, and it got shelved.”

There’s Pramhed, Rebecca’s name in the metadata for some of the diagrams.

“Clearly it didn’t,” Lexa says. “Your partner must have taken it with him.”


Lorelei Sarin.

Formerly married to one Richard Tsing.

“Where is she?” Lexa asks, and Monty says the answer out loud before Becca can.

“Dead.” He looks at Abby. “Clarke and Connor set her on fire. She was a scientist at Mount Weather.”

Abby is breathing very, very hard. Monty isn’t sure she should be listening, exactly, but he had offered, and he doesn’t want to be patronizing.
“And then Emerson ran off with the research, and brought it to Frost,” Lexa says.

“And it all circles back to your girl.”

“She’s not—” Lexa sighs. “Do you know how to shut it down?”

The program Becca had been working on wasn’t quite ALIE. But it wasn’t entirely different. Maybe—

“That’s no longer my division, I’m afraid,” Becca says. “And the United States Government is not enthusiastic about admitting to programs that most of its citizens would find so ethically questionable. Especially since you guys in Polis have done such a good job keeping your… unique situation contained, and out of the spotlight.”

“So, what.” Lexa’s voice is thinly veiled anger, with a strong dose of disgust. “You’re just going to let an opportunistic, power hungry bitch and her sadistic lackey take over the world?”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Heda.”

“Do not use my father’s name.”

Silence. They might be glaring at each other. If thinking about Clarke having parents has been a little weird, the idea of Lexa having parents is just downright bizarre.

Maybe after all of this is over, Monty should try and get in touch with his mom.

“I didn’t kill him, Lexa.”

“No?” She says it so quietly that the mic almost misses it.

“I didn’t send him out to be killed, either.”

More silence.

“What I was going to say,” Becca continues, “is that I’m not just going to let your Nia Frost take over the world. But we can’t step in officially, either. So I’ll give you what I have. I’m sure that, ah… Montgomery Sagong Green will be able to make something of it faster than my entire department anyway.”

He exchanges a wide-eyed look with Abby, and resists the urge to hide under the table. If they already know he’s here then they already know he’s here, and if Becca’s just trying to remind Lexa that she apparently knows everything about them then, well, she just did that. Unless they’re trying to get him to commit as much treason as possible—is what he’s doing treason? Is it only treason if he shares it with other countries—before they arrest and kill him. But they won’t do that, because Clarke would save him. With Lexa as her sidekick. Or whatever.

Becca and Lexa seem to have a mutual understanding, at least.

“Are you scared?” It slips out before he can stop it. Abby just shrugs.

“Yes,” she says, after a second. “But I’m more scared of ALIE than I am of federal prison.”

That’s probably just because she hasn’t been in a high security prison before.

Still, it’s weirdly comforting.
“—Conditions apply, of course.”

“What conditions?” Lexa’s gone sharp again.

“Unless you have any more blackmail you’re willing to play, then I think it’s time the information went both ways, isn’t it?”

“What kind of information?”

“Aden Gruter.”

“No.”

Monty resists the urge to do a search on Aden Gruter.

Becca doesn’t respond.

“No,” Lexa says again. “You can ask anything from me. You touch him—”

“And you destroy us. Sure. Between Aden and Griffin, one would think that you’re starting to form a dangerous number of attachments.”

“You want something good on me? That you never picked up, before you left me?”

Interesting word choice.

A sigh. “Everyone knew you were gay, Lex.”

“I’ve never had a period.”

Ok. Ew.

Silence from Becca’s end.

“I got the rest of puberty. I got the zits and the boobs and the discharge. But I never menstruated. So add that to your data. Something got fucked up.”


“He’s never gotten a period either.”

“Very funny. Is he displaying signs of a normal reproductive system?”

That seems like a very rude question, and this whole conversation is making Monty incredibly uncomfortable. He didn’t want to know this, especially since Lexa clearly didn’t want to share it. Forcing someone to give up information about their bodily cycles just seems… skeezy.

“He’s eleven,” Lexa says, after a long silence.

“And?”

More silence.

“No. Not yet.”

“And was that difficult?”
Beat.

“What was that help you were offering?”

“Be at the Jefferson Memorial in, ah… two hours.” A longer pause than before. Then— “And it really was good to see you, Alexis. I do wish you the best.”

Monty tries to picture Lexa’s face, but he doesn’t know her well enough to even guess at how she’d react. Then— “Take care of yourself, Becca.”

The door clicks shut behind her. Her shoes tap-tap-tap across the floor with the kind of authority only women’s heels have ever been able to project. She greets someone in the elevator.

Monty wonders, not for the first time, what the hell is going on in her head.

Chapter End Notes

I always have to remind myself that this story is set in Spring ’16, before the election, back when we had hope. It’s kind of painful to write, when politics comes up.
Chapter Summary

“I… cannot even begin to tell you the kind of weird shit this is,” Monty says.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Jefferson Memorial is a round, Greek-temple looking building. Columns, domes— Lexa doesn’t really know much about architecture. She doesn’t know much about Jefferson, either. Just that he was all about freedom, and owned slaves.

A voice in her head that sounds a bit like Becca’s suggests that she should be familiar with that. Acting like she’s saving people while actually owning them.

But it’s not the same. Not at all.

She’s brought peace. Jobs. Lives. She just has to—

It doesn’t matter.

It’s not like Becca has done any better.

There’s a man sitting on the stairs, back to the building, tapping away on his phone. There’s decent tourist flow, and the pose is not unusual— many other steps are also occupied— but he’s next to one of those Lululemon bags, with something pink coming out the top.

It could be nothing. Just a man who doesn’t care about gender norms. But it’s the type of thing Becca would find amusing. Lexa wanders over— a perfected bored millennial on phone walk— and sits down next to him.

He taps his phone, and a picture of Becca comes up.

“It’s cute,” Lexa says, because hopefully he’ll pass that along. She can be funny, too.

The man shifts. Says, “heh.” Then brushes the top of the bag as he stands and walks away, not looking back.

Lexus waits a few more minutes, and then picks up the bag. She relocates to another side of stairs, with different tourists and no one to think that she’s stealing anything, before taking out the pink yoga pants on top and peeking inside.

An altoid tin.

There’s going to be security cameras, and she’s in the background of at least five snapchats by now, so Lexa puts the pants back in and makes for the metro. Altoid tin suggests something small — USB or computer card, probably. Something likely to have trackers. She’s got to meet up with Python— Monty— to check if it’s clean and clean it if it isn’t, but they can’t do that at Abby’s.
They should do it in public. Somewhere right and white enough that any overt government intervention could present a PR problem.

She texts Monty and Abby to meet her at a Starbucks on the Georgetown campus.

Lexa would be inclined to hate Starbucks on principle, but she first met Clarke in a Starbucks, and that gives her some fond memories.

Well. She’d technically met Clarke the night before in a warehouse— but that was Skylark. Starbucks was when she first saw Clarke laugh.

And then Gustus had tried to frame Clarke for attempted murder.

She frowns up at the mermaid sign, and decides to focus on the earlier parts of the encounter.

Abby and Monty are already set up at a table in the back corner. Abby is sipping a latte and Monty is repeatedly jamming a straw into an oreo monstrosity while tapping away on his phone. A closer inspection reveals that he’s playing that game with the cubes.

“How’d it go?” Abby asks, watching her carefully. She knows something, then. Monty’s hack has been at least a bit of a success.

“That went well.” Lexa waves the bag, but hesitates as she pulls out the chair. The other two have claimed the ones that face the room. Lexa’s going to be leaving her back exposed. That always makes her itch.

But it means her body is going to block whatever is in the tin from view.

And she doesn’t think her death would be advantageous to the CIA at this point.

So she sits.

“She said it’s a very early version of what might have become the City of Light. I haven’t looked at it yet. You guys learn anything?”

They exchange a look.

So. Yes.

Oh god, was she in the CIA files? She’d have thought that she’d been removed from most records, but then, the point was to get at things that someone might have wanted hidden.

Was Aden in there?

“Tsing,” Monty says. “From Mount Weather. She was involved in the early version, and probably brought it with her when she left.”

Lexa nods. “Lorelei. Becca said she died when you— er.”
Monty has a very innocent, youngish looking face. This makes it all the more alarming when his grin turns sinister. “She was very special to us,” he says.

*And it all circles back to your girl.*

There had been a what the public was assured at the time was a thorough government investigation into Mount Weather. Clearly not thorough enough if Emerson managed to get away with important data, but then, the place had also been largely destroyed chaos. Tsing and Wallace’s scorched bodies had been identified by dental records.

Lexa wonders which members of Sky Crew had killed them.

“Let’s see what’s in the bag, then,” Abby says.

Right.

Lexa reaches past the yoga pants for the altoid tin. Inside is… scented tissues. And wrapped in that, a micro SD card and a shiny black thing about the size of Lexa’s thumbprint. It’s almost bead-like, with a sort of raised hexagonal pattern on the top. There are no ports on it, no way to plug it into a computer that she can see.

She hands the whole tin over to Monty. “Is there a way to make sure they aren’t tracking or listening to us?”

“The SD, yeah. This?” he points at the black thing. “I have no idea.” From his bag he pulls out a brick-looking thing full of different card slots, with a small screen. He pops the SD card in and frowns at something, waiting. At the table behind them, there’s an undergrad complaining about social dynamics on the women’s volleyball team. Lexa used to look down on these people, with lesser problems. But when a kid is mean to Aden or when she doesn’t establish what their relationship is before falling in love with the woman she’s sleeping with— those things feel just as important.

“There’s no viruses,” Monty announces, cutting off Lexa’s train of thought. Probably for the best. He switches the SD card to a laptop, clicking around for a minute. There’s a frown growing on his face. “Just a password. It’ll take me a while to get through, it’s really encrypted.”

“Is there a password hint?” Abby asks. “Why would she give Lexa something she can’t read?”

“Um…” Tap, tap, tap-tap-tap. “Yeah, it’s… big-L little-T, Big A, H. and then little-B, little-D.”

Lt. AH bd.

Fuck Becca.

Fuck her straight to hell.

Don’t say my dad’s name, Lexa had said.

“I know it,” she manages. Monty turns the laptop towards her, and it takes a few tries— January3066, 013066, before finally getting in on 01301966.

And she hates herself, because it took her almost ten seconds to remember her father’s birthday.

They seem to know better than to ask her about it, bringing up, again, the question about what exactly they know already.
“So you don’t have ports in your brain, then,” Lexa notes, watching Monty skim the files on the card. “A few of my guys had a bet.”

None of ‘her guys’ had any such thing, but it’s a prompt— to get him to tell her about his powers without realizing he’s been asked. Sure enough, he grins, the murderous intent dropping away.

“Nah,” he says. “I’m just very intuitive about programming. USB ports in my brain? Even if that was possible, it’s a terrible idea, all someone would have to do would be to upload some malware and… holy shit.”

Abby and Lexa both lean around to stare at the computer screen, but all it’s showing is that Adobe Reader is taking a long time to open.

“What?” Abby asks.

“I’ve been thinking about this totally wrong,” he says. “I’ve been thinking about the City of Light as a system or database to be hacked. But it’s also just a computer program. And what computer programs are really good at is freezing and crashing.”

The adobe logo stares back at them, underlining the point. Lexa leans back, settling again in her seat.

“Think about it. They could, in theory, have overrun all of Polis. They certainly have enough ways to manipulate people into taking them. But they haven’t yet. It’s seemed like numbers have been holding steady for a while. So maybe they can’t take any more people. Maybe there’s a way to overload their servers—”

“What, get everyone in the city chipped all at once?” Lexa does not really like the direction that’s going.

“We couldn’t. We don’t have enough chips, and they wouldn’t make more than could be in the system. But if we could get in to developer mode— they have to have one, we haven’t seen any glitches, but that doesn’t mean there haven’t been any, it means someone’s running IT— if we get in developer mode we can create a hundred thousand sim profiles. Maybe we could freeze it long enough to take it down.”

“What would that do to the people already inside?” If they have to be collateral damage, Lexa thinks that she might be able to stomach it— but it’s thousands of people, and while she’s willing to kill one or two of them in the heat of a fight….

Well.

Last resort.

“I have no idea.” Monty looks faintly ill as well. “But she’s got to have errors sometimes, statistically— and we haven’t seen anyone dead of obvious chip causes, although I suppose that could be easily covered up.”

“ALIE is a program,” Lexa corrects. “Not a she.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Monty brightens suddenly. Presumably the PDF has loaded. “Ah!” Then: “Uh…”

“Huh,” Abby says, leaning closer.
Lexa tries not to be irritated that she’s the only one without a clear view of the screen. She could awkwardly lean around again, but that might be telling them too much about her emotional state.

And maybe she doesn’t care. “What is it?”

“I… cannot even begin to tell you the kind of weird shit this is,” Monty says. He’s tapping repeatedly on the same key—scrolling. “I think… the black thing is supposed to go in a person’s nervous system. And somehow release chemicals and control emotions that can be controlled by a person elsewhere. They could keep their soldiers from feeling pain. Or panic.”

Jesus.

“Any way we could use it to get to ALIE? Or… you were talking about malware, right?” Lexa frowns at the sugar packets. “If someone put this in their head and then took a chip, would that send conflicting information to ALIE that would slow her down, or would that just kill the person?”

“I have no idea,” Monty says again.

“We can’t even see yet if they ever tested this on people.” Abby picks up the weird chip again, frowning at it. “I’m not sure how you could get this into someone safely, much less connect it with their nerves. There must be strands that come out of it somehow, sending individual messages.”

Now there’s a creepy mental image.

Still, there’s something close to hope growing in Lexa’s chest. She wants to text Clarke. She wants to call Clarke and tell her, spread the optimism— but it’s still early and they still don’t have anything solid and even though Wire and Anya had both assured her that the phones were heavily encrypted, she’s hesitant about saying anything important over text.

She settles for sending an emoji of a rainbow.

---

They don’t leave DC until midnight.

Initially, they’d thought that they would go right after Abby returned the rental car, and Lexa got another one under a fake driver’s license. They’d thought that they’d turn straight back around and be in Polis by morning.

And then all the caffeine and five hour energy they’d been drinking stopped being sufficient.

All they’d had were naps in the car since— Christ, before Lexa’s meeting with Roan. When was that? Two days ago? The day before yesterday? The fact that she doesn’t know is warning enough, and while Lexa had thought she could pull it off, she didn’t trust herself to react quickly enough in an emergency.

So they’d passed out at Abby’s.

In retrospect, Lexa thinks, settling into the back seat of the car, it wasn’t the safest of plans. They’d had no one on guard. But they’re fine, now. Rested, even.
The new rental has a roomier back seat, too.

Lexa is refreshed and well rested and wide awake, which is why she curls up into Monty’s padded bag of computers, hopes he doesn’t crash the car, and falls asleep.

(She dreams of Clarke’s hands and Aden screaming and drowning.)

And then— “Gas station,” Monty says, as she forces her eyes open. It’s going on four in the morning, now. “We’ve still got over half a tank, but if anyone wants to pee…”

“I want more five-hour energy,” Lexa mutters. Abby says something that might be an agreement, but she’s got a string of drool connecting her face to the seatback, so it’s hard to tell. “I can drive next, if you want to sleep.”

“I want to go through more of Becca’s files, actually,” he says. “I’ve been thinking on it as we drove, and…” he trails off into a nonsensical list of terms that Lexa knows the technical definitions of but cannot comprehend when placed together.

“I’ll get us some energy drinks,” she says when he pauses for breath. Someone’s got to have marked Abby, by this point— even if it’s the CIA and not the City of Light, it’s still not worth sending her in alone, not when she can’t defend herself.

“Put on the blue hair!”

Yeah, why the hell not.

Goggles wasn’t wrong, either: the poor rural twenty-four hour night manager doesn’t seem to know where to look, and settles for avoiding her eye altogether. He does manage to raise an eyebrow at the six bottles of five-hour energy and three bags of donuts that she drops on the counter, but he doesn’t say anything.

Is there a legal caffeination limit for driving?

There probably should be.

“As a doctor, I cannot recommend this at all,” Abby says when Lexa slaps the bottle into her hand. She’d been saying a variant of the same thing with every one she drank, and always drank it anyway.

Lexa settles in the driver’s seat, taking a minute to get used to the pedals, the wheel— and then, when she pulls out onto the highway, how it handles. If she’s going to pull any crazy stunts, it’s always good to know how fast it’ll turn.

Satisfied, she speeds up, and they head farther into the dark.

Sunrise, when it comes, is beautiful.

Lexa should appreciate it more than she does.
Aden has never told Lexa that he knows when she’s lying, because he’s afraid that if he does, she
won’t talk to him at all.

He’s not an idiot, okay, he’s not whining that she doesn’t pay enough attention to him like some
little kid, because Aden isn’t some little kid. He’s eleven.

He’s not dumb, either. He knows he’s not, like, an adult, but he’s the same age as Harry Potter in
book one and pretty much the same age as Percy Jackson and Lyra Belacqua. And he’s been in
training for longer than any of them had.

And the thing is, the thing is Lexa doesn’t have to look after him. She has the whole city. And
there’s lots of important stuff going on there. So he’s not going to push it. Because nobody wants to
be around someone they can never ever lie to.

But the other thing is, Lexa is in trouble.

She’d lied to him before she left (she’d told him she was going to her office, she obviously left
town, he notices these things) and now she’s in trouble. He can feel it, the same way he knows
when she’s lying— a tension in his gut, the prickling on his skin, the way he can’t focus on one
thing for more than a few seconds.

Indra probably knows where she is. She had dropped by earlier, saying she was leaving some stuff
for Lexa, but Aden thinks that it was really to check up on him: Indra always leaves stuff in Lexa’s
office. So she knows Lexa is gone, but Indra might not listen to him, because Indra doesn’t listen to
anyone except sometimes Anya and Lexa if she thinks they’re clearly right. She didn’t trust Sky
Crew with their powers, so she probably won’t trust Aden’s, either.

But Clarke! Clarke has powers, and she and Lexa are in love. She’s nice. She’ll listen.

He’s not supposed to leave, except for school. And he can’t tell Titus because Titus might not be
supposed to know that Lexa is gone.

“I want to talk to Clarke,” he says, after considering things for a minute.

Titus frowns at him over the top of his book. “Excuse me?”

“I want to talk to Clarke.” Titus isn’t the boss of him. He can talk to who he wants. Except, he
can’t, but he digs his fingers into his stool and tries to stare the old man down.

“Why?”

“Well, she and Lexa are together.”

Ah, there’s Titus’s long suffering close-eyes-for-two-full-seconds-to-regroup face. It’s so nice
when someone else causes him to make that face. It’s the first time ever it hasn’t been Aden’s
fault. “Why does this mean you have to talk to her?”

“Well,” and he thinks back to the last two dozen books he’s read, “I have to make sure that her
intentions are honorable.”

“Ex…cuse me?”
“Lexa’s basically my sister,” Aden insists. “That’s what brothers are supposed to do.”

Titus hides his face in his hands. For a second Aden thinks that he’s finally managed to move the man to tears, but he’s laughing hysterically. Which is rude. Aden’s trying to lie, here.

“You can assess her… intentions—” and here he pauses for another laughing fit, which is weird, because Titus has never laughed this much in the entire time Aden has known him, “next time she visits, okay?”

“But then Lexa will be here and I can’t do that when Lexa’s around.”

“Oh, please do.”

Aden jumps off his stool and puts his hands on his hips. “You’re not taking me seriously!” and Lexa is in trouble and he has to talk to Clarke right now!

“Perish the thought,” Titus says. “I’m sure Skylark has lots of important things to do. Anyway, I don’t have her phone number.”

“She’s just downstairs—”

“Absolutely not.”

Right. Yeah. Because her entire team is also downstairs. Although Aden thinks he trusts them, because Lexa trusts Clarke, and Nora’s brother Bryan trusts Turret. And if Lexa trusts Clarke then Clarke’s people must be trustworthy.

He doesn’t have time to argue that point, though. This is clearly a dead end.

“Fine,” he says, trying to sound disappointed. “I’m going to the bathroom.”

“Thanks for sharing.” Titus disappears again behind his really boring book.

There’s a way out of here from the bathroom. Titus doesn’t know about it. He knows about the way through Aden and Lexa’s closets, but not the one in the shower. He could become compromised, Lexa had told him. It’s best to know that there’s something just they know.

(And it makes him feel important, having secrets with just Lexa.)

So he goes to the bathroom. And pees. He tries to make it extra loud so that Titus hears it, but he also has sometimes wet himself when he gets too anxious or excited and he wants to have his bladder totally empty.

Lexa’s in trouble Lexa’s in trouble Lexa’s in trouble.

He’s had the feeling before, a couple times— he only remembers bits of the army hospital, but that feeling had been in there. And then when she first got the Coalition together. But those times she’d been with Indra and Anya and Gustus, and she’s not now, because he’s seen Indra and Anya since Lexa left, and Gustus is dead.

He can do this.

So he finishes peeing, and then pops the hidden door on the back of the shower. There’s a crawl space in there, only big enough for someone barely larger than Lexa. And he’s good at this, because he and Lexa practice this periodically, crawling along on their stomachs as fast as they can. He’s got a minute, probably, unless Titus thinks he was acting weird and goes to check on him
“ADEN!”

Or, less than a minute.

He scuttles faster. He thinks he’s almost there—yes—the ground starts to slope as a warning, and then there’s the actual slide, with a higher ceiling in case he needs to turn around. But he doesn’t, he loves going down head first even though it’s an emergency—

He skids to a stop at the bottom and then kicks open the service hatch in the hidden stairwell, pulling open the door to their hall. He doesn’t know which one is Clarke’s, but he hears voices coming from one of them—he heads towards it but then the elevator door opens and Titus’s hands are digging into his arm.

“Geoff!” He yells. He knows how to break a basic hold, and he feels good doing it, twisting away and making a break down the hall.

“Get back—” Titus hisses.

Aden yells. “Clarke! Clarke!”

One of the doors opens and a really pretty girl steps out, frowning. “What the hell?”

“Clarke!” Aden hollers again, and Titus is almost on him: he tries to go into the room behind the girl but she catches his arm. He tries to free himself again, but she doesn’t let go. At least he can see inside now, and there’s Clarke, getting up from the couch.

Titus has his other arm, and Aden kicks at him. “Clarke!” he yells again. “Clarke, Lexa’s in trouble!”

“Who the hell are you,” the pretty girl asks, holding him even harder than Titus is pulling.

“He’s okay, O—er, Shadow,” Clarke says.

Titus splutters. “I need to take him back upstairs at once—”

Silence. Then Titus does. And then Shadow (Shadow!!) does as well, and he rubs his arm, not because it hurts but because he wants them to feel bad for being mean to him.

Anya looks furious, like, really mad, madder than he’s ever seen her. He didn’t know she could be that mad.

“Lexa’s in trouble!” he says again, and now the rest of Sky Crew is gathering around and that’s so cool except he’s too scared to appreciate it and he can’t even tell Nora anyway. “I always know when she’s in trouble, and she’s in trouble.”
“You always know—”

“Is someone going to explain anything?” A guy asks. He’s very tall. Aden doesn’t know which one is Turret, but he thinks he’d feel better if he did. “Who the hell is this kid?”

“I live with Lexa,” he says. Behind him he hears a smacking sound. Titus has probably slapped his own face. Maybe they’ll be nicer if he’s polite. How do you be polite? “May I come in?”

The guy points a gun at him. “Sure.”

“It’s fine,” Clarke says, swatting the gun away. Which is not safe! You can’t just swat guns! But Clarke probably spends a lot more time with them than Aden does. So he goes in.

“You are in time out for the rest of your life,” Titus says.

Inside is… really cool, too. There’s like five computer monitors set up and there’s a girl sitting on a spinning chair— she’s got headphones around her neck, like she’s just pulled them off. Then there are couches, and weapons and for some reason clothes everywhere. There’s a boy lying down on the couch who is really pale and looks like someone his teacher would tell him to stay away from, and a table, with a chess set on it— there’s a boy sitting on one side, but the other is empty. There’s a bunch more people too, standing by the entrance to the kitchen: they probably came out in all the commotion. Lexa says to always have a plan, and Annabeth Chase always does have a plan, but Aden doesn’t have a plan beyond this. He doesn’t know how to convince them that he’s telling the truth and he doesn’t even know if they know where Lexa is.

And he’s in time out for the rest of his life.

His eyes are watering. But if he thinks about not crying he’s going to start crying.

“Lexa’s in danger,” he says for like, the thirtieth time. “I know, okay, when she lies, or when she’s in danger, and stuff, okay, I just feel it and I know she’s in danger. Or— she’s going to be in danger.”

“Are you psychic?” A girl asks him. He doesn’t know which one she is. She’s got really gross looking scars on her neck.

“No, I just—”

“Lexa’s really good at fighting,” Anya says, like he’s a little kid and doesn’t know that Lexa is good at fighting. “I’m sure she can take care of whatever is going on. She always has before, remember?”

Well she also got shot once. And she heals, but there are also worse things that could happen, they could kill her, or take her away forever, or they could find out about their blood and then take her away forever and then kill her.

“Wait, but does that mean— uh, the others are you danger?” the boy on the couch asks.

“I’m sorry, who is this?” the boy with the gun asks again.

“I’m Aden,” Aden says. “Lexa’s my— um, sister, and I live with her and I have powers too and I’m telling you you need to hurry!” he turns to Clarke again. “You love her too, we can’t let them get her!” His last words are a shriek. It’s very childish. He doesn’t care anymore.

“Wait,” the boy says, turning to Clarke also. “You what?”
“Ha!” Shadow and another boy say, both pointing at Clarke from opposite sides of the room.

Clarke ignores them, then turns and Aden realizes this might not have been something that he should have said but it’s true, he’s pretty sure. They wouldn’t be having sleepovers if they didn’t love each other. (He’s not an idiot, he knows what sex is, even if he doesn’t understand or want to understand—that.)

“Homer?” She says, to the boy who’s still gaping. “Where are they?”

“Edge of the city, they just slowed down, getting off the highway—they should be in com range in the next couple minutes. Then you can talk with her and—oh.”

“What?” Aden asks. He thought he was asking calmly. It comes out as more like a wail.

“Some people I’ve fought are close to them.”

“Might not mean anything,” Anya says slowly. “We already know ALIE is everywhere.”

“No, there’s—a lot of them.”

“Everybody mobile, be ready to go in sixty seconds,” Clarke says, before grabbing a jacket and diving into one of the bedrooms. There’s one heartbeat of silence and then everyone is moving except the boy at the chessboard, Wire, and the boy on the couch. Anya takes off, shouting for Indra, and Titus jumps out of the way as a few of Sky Crew charge past him.

Sky Crew are on it. They’ll fix it.

But Clarke seemed scared.

“Hey, kid.” The boy by the chess board waves him over. Titus follows him, less than a step behind. The boy looks at Titus, and then back at Aden. He’s got a nice looking face. Brown skin and frizzy hair that looks like it hasn’t been cut in a while. Aden needs a haircut, too, but Titus isn’t very good at them so the days after his haircut are always embarrassing. “Do you know how to play chess?”

“Don’t recruit the kid to the nerd brigade!” shouts Homer, who is currently standing in the middle of the room strapping guns to various body parts.

“You’ve read The Iliad more than once!” chess boy calls back, and that’s good. That’s calming. Maybe they’re just bantering to make him calm, but it’s working.

“No,” Aden says. “Who are you? Don’t you have a job? Are you hurt?”

“I’m Wells,” he says. “I don’t… I’m not really a part of Sky Crew.” He rubs the back of his neck. “I’m just sort of…”

“We picked him up by the side of the road,” Homer says. Then he smiles. It’s a very stressed smile. The rest of Sky Crew lets the door fall shut with a bang, and Titus’s fingers are digging hard into Aden’s shoulder. Titus will make him go upstairs and he doesn’t want to go upstairs, he wants to stay here and know what’s going on. Anya’s staying here, too—she’s come back and is hovering over Wire’s shoulder, and if Anya’s here, Titus might have to let him stay too.

“Clown car, this is base,” Wire says.

Aden wants to vomit.
It’s late afternoon when they see the first exits for Polis. They’ve cycled around and Lexa is back at the wheel—a bit more of a risky proposition, but it’s not announcing their departure they way it would have if they saw her leave.

Still, she keeps eyes on all the cars around them. It doesn’t help much: lots of people pull off into Polis. Lots of people get off at the exit for downtown.

“We’re almost in comm range,” Monty says, passing a couple up through the gap between the seats. It’s good to see that he hasn’t gotten completely sucked into Becca’s mad science. Every now and then he’s started a conversation with Abby about parts of the brain, or something that was in Tsing’s files. Lexa hasn’t been able to follow it, and her general strategy of pretending to know what people are talking about until she figures it out doesn’t really apply when it comes to neuroscience.

She hates that feeling. She’s used to knowing more than everybody in the room.

What she can do is drive and watch the drivers around them. Nobody would look suspicious, except everybody looks suspicious.

Lexa grabs one of the ear pieces from where Monty had put them, and works it in.

A few second later, it gives them a soft beep, letting them know they’re online.

“Clown car to base, clown car to base,” Monty says. “Do you read?”

“Clown car, this is base.” It’s a woman’s voice—she hasn’t quite gotten them all down yet. Gunner? Wire? “Team is on route to your location. Homer sensed a lot of presumed City.”

Yeah that’s doing wonders for Lexa’s paranoia. She pulls down a side street that she knows has a back alley, and then turns down it as well. It’s barely wide enough for their car, but it’ll show if anyone’s tailing them.

A Jeep turns to follow them.

“Not subtle, are they,” Abby mutters.

“Mm. This is Susan, we’ve got at least one Jeep full on our tail. Clown car—” okay, the name is kind of funny, “hold on.”

She gets out of the alley and yanks the car around, pulling into traffic to a chorus of horns.

“Fuck!” Abby’s head bounces against the seatback.

“Sorry!”

“Clown car, if you can draw them farther North we might be able to ambush them,” and it’s a relief to hear Clarke’s voice, even if she’s talking about an ambush.
“Not sure we can do that,” Lexa admits. She careens around another corner, and while it’s not subtle, ALIE has already ID’d their car, so it isn’t going to matter, is it?

Someone in the car behind them fires. Monty yelps. Lexa swears, loudly.

“They’re opening fire. How the fuck did they find us so fast?”

“Don’t know. Knife is headed towards you on a motorcycle, so don’t shoot her.” Who the fuck is Kni— oh. Indra. Then— “We have visual. We're up above the Macy's. Er, are you the silver Mazda?”

“That isn’t getting the security deposit back, yeah,” Monty says.

“Gunner, go for the tires. Clown car—”

But whatever Clarke is going to order isn’t going to work because Lexa makes the next turn and there’s a man under an overhang raising a really big fucking gun, and Sky Crew is on the roof so they’re not going to be able to get him and it’s not like they can just drive past, and the civilians of the downtown area are all running and the man makes eye contact with Lexa and aims and she can’t just turn—

And the thing is—

The thing is that Lexa is Polis and Polis is Lexa and Polis needs her and her secrets, but all she can see is Clarke’s face, worried about her mother, and if Abby and Monty die here, Clarke will never, ever get over it. And this is why, this is why she should only love her city and Aden, everything else is a distraction but it’s too late it’s fucking too late, she’ll survive this but the Coalition might not—

(“She’ll destroy you,” Gustus had said.)

(In another world, Lexa would start and stop wars for Clarke, but in this one— in this one—)

She slams one foot on the break and uses the other to roll over the seat, shouting for Monty to duck—

Swinging onto Abby’s lap, her back to the gunman, covering the doctor as best she can—

Something punches her in the back. Bullet. And another one. In her ear, there is screaming—

Rata-tata-tata-tat—

She’s twelve years old and one of her dad’s friend is teaching her how to shoot with an assault rifle—

It had shaken so much in her hands—

Another shot to her back—

Another, another—

Chapter End Notes
I was going to get this done for the third, and then I thought, do I really want to honor the memorial of Lexa getting shot by writing about getting Lexa shot? No. No I do not. Although in this world, she has super healing powers.

Sorry for the slower updates. My thesis is killing me.

As usual, comments are love and life and air. Happy Clexa week!
“Roan, you still there?”

“Are you done with your personal drama?” he asks.

The first gunshot makes her heart stop. The second launches her into overtime as she spins to the sound, shooting, but the shooter is under a canopy and the darts don’t go through—

But they’re still firing, the window of the car is smashed in and she can hear female cries of pain from the comms and *Lexa* is in that car and *her mother* is in that car and the wind is howling in her ear—

*No, no no no—*

“Nate!” she yells, and it’s a mistake, she shouldn’t have used his name but they’re on the roof of a department store and someone down there is hurt and Miller, thank God for Miller, he doesn’t hesitate. He looks down at the ugly green canopy, and he’s got a bullet gun in his hand, and he fires. Down below, the shooting stops.

(Miller just killed someone who might have been innocent, deep inside— could have been Wells’s father or Nina from the ER or a goddamn child and Clarke would be terrified by how much she doesn’t care if she wasn’t so busy being terrified by the car in the middle of the street, that isn’t moving, with people she loves inside it.)

Drivers are ditching their cars and running for it— she’ll assume that those ones are clean. It’s the others that worry her, the cars that are trying to pull forward— the stragglers heading towards the Mazda, and some of them might be trying to help, but she isn’t going to trust it.

“Assume anyone headed for the car is chipped,” she orders. A few feet away, Miller lines up a shot, and takes down two people one after the other. And Clarke jumps.

Normally she’s got the gravity shift timed so that she can bounce, but she lands a little hard, jarring her knees— but there’s no time, no time, and she orders Monroe to cover her as she makes for the Mazda—

A bullet flies over her head and this is is, *this* is their *Godfather* moment, and there’s Lexa, sitting in Abby’s lap, why is she doing that— there’s blood all over her—

*Skylark get down—* she ducks, and there’s a thud as another body drops, and she can’t get close enough to the car—

*Python do you copy?”* She can’t see him. *“Susan? Doc?” Mom, Mom—*

*I’m here,*” Monty gasps. And Clarke is almost to the car when a motorcycle finishes weaving
between the cars, and she’s about to shoot it but it’s Indra, it’s Indra, thank God— she turns with a
dramatic screech and it gives Clarke the cover to get to the car— Indra’s there first, though, she
gestures for Abby to unlock the door— she has to reach around Lexa— (Lexa’s body?) to do so,
and Clarke jumps into the back seat, slamming the door behind her. It's harder than it should be:
the wind has picked up, turning the whole street into a bit of a wind tunnel.

Monty is squeezed into the floor between the seat, lying on his back, gun up.

Indra hits the gas. “Headed to a… safe house. Two-oh-nine Fog Street.”

“That’s three blocks northeast” Raven says. “Roof squad—”

“On our way.” Miller.

“I’ve got the flash bombs,” says Harper. “Slowing down pursuers.”

If there’s a bright light behind them, Clarke doesn’t see it. If there are civilians still on the road
behind them, Clarke thinks they lack situational awareness.

“Monty.” Clarke reaches for him. “Monty, Mom, are you shot? They might not know if they are,
adrenaline does that, but Lexa, Lexa—

Monty shakes his head and Clarke leans up between the seats. There’s so much blood. God, there’s
so much black blood.

“I—” Abby manages. “Lexa— covered me. She’s— her—”

Her mom wasn’t supposed to be in danger, not like this. She was never supposed to get shot at.

“Her blood, I know.” Clarke needs something to stop the bleeding, but all she lands on is a plastic
grocery bag. It’s not enough but Lexa heals but what if she’s dead already what if—

“Unf,” Lexa says, and Clarke wants to cry in relief. If she’s not dead that means she’s not going to
die, right? “Who is… driving this car?”

“I am,” Indra says.

“Lexa,” Clarke manages. She sort of pats the grocery bag down over a patch of blood but she
doesn’t know where the goddamn bullets are and she has to let go anyway because there’s the
sound of the motorcycle behind them and turns, gun raised—

“It’s Homer,” Bellamy yells. “Also, Revel.” The back of an arm comes up behind him— it sort of
waves, but there’s a gun in there, and Clarke can only assume Murphy is riding backwards and
shooting at anyone that gets close.

“Roadblock, motherfuckers!” Murphy hoots, shooting again. “Aiming for the tires.”

They round the corner, and everyone is flung into the side of the car.

“Lexa,” Clarke says again. “Lexa, can you survive this?” Lexa wouldn’t lie, not about this, would
she? And she has to know if her body is healing.

“Yeah.” The word is shaky. “Yeah, I’m okay. Just a little shot.”

That’s hilarious. In ten seconds, it’s going to be hilarious.
Ten seconds pass.

It’s not hilarious.

They stop in front of a house with boarded up windows and a For Sale sign in the lawn, which doesn’t really look like a safehouse— but then, Clarke has never had or been to a safehouse.

They’re ahead of their pursuit, but ALIE’s reinforcements could be coming from any direction.

“Rooftops, what’s your status?” Clarke asks.


“I’ll take the Commander,” Indra says. “Make sure you have the first-aid kit.”

Like she just needs a bandaid.

“I have the computers.” Monty slings his pack over his shoulder.

“Covering you,” Murphy says. “Three— two—”

“The code to the garage is 0-3-0-7,” Indra hisses, and they move.

Clarke tries to lighten up as she makes the dash, letting her strides be longer— and she’s punching in the code to the garage and it’s opening so fucking slowly, but Indra ducks under with Lexa in her arms, and Abby is following, bag in hand, and then they’re going into the main part of the house and Clarke wants to follow but then there’s Monty, and there’s someone with a gun across the street— she starts to shout a warning but Murphy has already fired first, and the bullet goes into the car—

“Get inside!” She yells, and Bellamy turns to run.

And the others arrive in a pack, dusty and a little bloody—

And then they’re shoved inside and the garage door is closing so fucking slowly—

“We got this,” Monroe shouts, keeping her gun trained on the crack. “Go!”

Clarke goes.

A living room— a kitchen— and then there’s a bedroom, and Indra is lying Lexa down on her stomach on the bed— there’s a trail of black blood, a fucking trail of blood—

“Get some water!” she shouts, and someone goes— Monty is bunkering down in the corner, powering up a laptop and she trusts him to not be doing something unnecessary—

“We need to barricade all the doors!” Miller shouts. “Get everything useful from the garage, it’s too big, we’re going to have to block it from the inside—”

And then Bellamy is next to her pressing a wet cloth into her hand and her hand is shaking, goddammit. And Lexa’s bleeding all over a tan bedspread and Clarke has to cut her shirt off with her knife— Clarke recognizes the shirt, she had both buttoned and unbuttoned it just a few days ago, but now it’s caked with blood and she lets it fall to either side. She unhooks Lexa’s bra and she knows this bra too. It’s a stupid thing to notice when everything has gone so catastrophically wrong. Clarke dabs at the wounds with the cloth, trying to see where they’re coming from: Lexa hisses, and it’s as bad as a scream of pain from anyone else. Blood is getting into her gloves:
fighting gloves, not doctor gloves, and she's going to have to take them off if she has to do anything delicate.

“Is no one else going to ask about the blood?” Bellamy mutters. He’s got his hand on Clarke’s shoulder and she’s never been more grateful for anything he’s done, ever: it’s keeping her there, keeping her grounded, keeping her from literally floating away in a panic.

Because Lexa is already trying to heal, with the bullets still inside.

“What the hell?” Abby mutters, staring at the new skin that’s forming, wrinkled and twisted.

“Surprise,” Lexa says.

“I’m going to have to cut them back open.” There’s a bullet near her spine, one in her shoulder, one just above her hip, one that’s probably lodged in her ribcage, and Clarke needs to think, dammit, needs to figure out which ones have to come out now and which ones Lexa will still be able to fight with. Because they’re going to have to fight their way out of here, if they’re going to make it at all.

“That’s fine,” Lexa gasps. “Just do it fast.”

“Gloves and scalpel.” She tries to order it, tries to sound in control as she can but she’s not, and her mom gently pushes her aside and puts the gloves on herself.

Right.

That’s good. That’s probably good.

Clarke clenches a fist.

“Group coming down the street,” Harper reports. “Armed—”

“And unconscious in three, two— ha!” Monroe says. Their voices are weirdly doubled, just audible through the door, but loud on the comms. “Got ‘em!”

“What’s— Lexa—” a younger voice says, and shit, is Aden still in the room? Is he listening to this? She hopes Lexa hasn’t heard—

“Aden?”

“Oh, yes,” Indra says slowly. She’s taken up guard position, with her gun trained on the door. “Yes he ran away from Titus to come tell us you were in trouble.”

“What— how—”

“Um,” Aden says. “I’m a little psychic? I think?”

Abby presses the blade into the bullet by Lexa’s spine, and she has to know how dangerous that is because none of them know how accurate the healing is going to be. Lexa’s still got scars, for fuck’s sake— if she got paralyzed—

“We will be discussing th—” Lexa bites down on her lip and Clarke reaches out for her, but that’s when there’s a thud on the wall outside. It’s then that she realizes that this bedroom has a closet, but no windows. There’s a patch of paint that doesn’t quite match the rest of the walls, as if someone had bricked the window up.

“We need a way out of here,” Bellamy says.
"Are you kidding? We just barricaded ourselves in!" Octavia shouts from the other room. Then, quieter, over the comms, "so Lexa’s okay?"

"Healing— ability—" Lexa says through gritted teeth. And maybe she shouldn’t talk, but it’s not like Clarke is going to suggest that, not now, because she’s speaking and that means she’s alive.

She’s alive when she shouldn’t be and that means—

"They don’t know about that, right? The City?"

"Even Anya and Indra didn’t know." Lexa frowns and then turns to Indra, who is raising her eyebrows. "…Right?"

"Well we knew that there was some weird shit happening with you."

"Yeah, we’re not dumb," Anya says, and good, she’s still with Raven, too.

"Help me move the sofa," Harper is saying.

"Did you find anything that could slow ALIE down?" Lexa had texted her a rainbow. That had to mean good things, right?

"Maybe," Monty says. "But nothing I can risk here."

Shit.

Shit.

Abby drops a bloody bullet onto the bedspread.

Clarke tries to think—

"Roan," she manages. "Lexa, your phone?"

"Don’t we not trust Roan?" Octavia asks. "Two days ago we did not trust Roan."

"We don’t trust Roan," Clarke confirms. "But we don’t have anything to lose, right?"

"I mean, there’s our lives." Indra doesn’t look like she’s against the idea, though.

"Phone’s in my back pocket," Lexa grunts. "Hopefully still works."

It’s a little weird, reaching into Lexa’s back pocket, but it’s not like she wants anyone else to do it. Clarke tugs the phone out. The case is still covered in blood: she spits on it, trying to smear it off with a bit of the bedspread. It still turns on, and she flips through the contacts.

"When I wave my hand," Clarke says, "carry on loudly like Lexa’s dying."

"So she’s not dying, then?" Octavia checks.

Clarke dials.

One ring.

A banging against the furniture barricades. Someone starts to hum ‘Do you hear the people sing?’. It’s probably Connor.
“Bottleneck it with unconscious bodies,” Monroe says. “Of course, in an hour, that’s going to be a real problem. Puke everywhere.”

“Hello?”

Clarke closes her eyes. “Hey, Roan. It’s Skylark.”

“Skylark, hey,” he says, sounding positively cheerful. “You’re still alive.”

“I am.” It’s not hard to look at Lexa and picture her teetering on the edge of death. Clarke lets a sob closer her throat for a second. Lexa could be dead right now. If she hadn’t jumped in front of Abby, her mother would be dead—or Monty—“But Lexa’s— Lexa’s— she’s alive but we need to get her out of here.”

“Incoming at the front window!” Monroe yells.

“Jesus fuck.” It’s a surprisingly emotional hiss. Then again, Clarke’s lying, there’s no reason Roan can’t be too. “And you want me to— what? I haven’t found the servers, if that’s what you’re after.”

“I’ll take anything.” It’s not a lie. Clarke’s got the edges of a plan, but she needs Roan to come up with it, make him think it was his idea. She waves her hand at the others, and Abby rises to the moment with beauty and grace.

“Get me more rags!” she says, and she might not be faking her desperation, either. “The bleeding isn’t slowing down.”

“Got it.” Monty jogs in place for a second, with decreasingly heavy footfalls.

“Tell Nia you told me the servers were somewhere else,” Clarke offers. “That should pull some attention, right? We just need some time—”

“Stay with me,” Abby says. “Hey! Lexa, look at me! Come on!”

If she doesn’t look, it’s far too easy to pretend. She had held Maya in her arms as she died. And Fox—she had said the same things to them. Fox had been so scared, and Clarke had promised that it was going to be okay. If they had timed things just a little differently Fox would be alive—

“I could try that.” Roan says slowly. “Every person in the City brings something new, some new resources, contacts, skills—they don’t actually want you to kill them. But soon you won’t have a choice.”

“Clarke,” Bellamy says. “We still wouldn’t be able to get her to a hospital. She’ll die anyway.”

“No.” Don’t look at Lexa, don’t look at Lexa. No, no—

“She wouldn’t want this!” he continues, then looks askance at Lexa like he’s trying to confirm that.

“Don’t talk about her like she’s dead!” Clarke roars back.

“Good lord.” That sounds like Wells.

“It’ll give her—and all of you—more of a chance.” And that’s true, isn’t it? This plan is likely to kill her but she trusts Raven and Monty and Lexa, trusts them to figure it out even if Clarke is dead. They just need some time. “Roan, you still there?”
“Are you done with your personal drama?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“Then, yes,” he says. “I’ll call you back. If I say ‘hey,’ it means there’s someone else listening. If I say ‘yo,’ my mom is listening, and if I say nobody’s listening then nobody’s listening.”

“Great.” Could he sound more like a dudebro? Clarke gestures at Abby again, and she starts yelling for more bandages. “I gotta go.”

Roan bursts into her quarters. Again. She’s going to have to talk to him about that: Nia has been following the siege on Fog street, and this isn’t an excellent time for interruptions.

“This isn’t an excellent time for interruptions,” she says.

“Skylark—Griffin—just called me,” he says, waving his phone like she doesn’t know what one is. “Begging me to find the servers. You saw that the Commander got shot a lot? They’re all freaking out.”

Desperate and at the end, but still looking for solutions. “Interesting,” Nia says. She’s getting regular text updates from ALIE, but it only knows what their people have seen.

“Yeah. We might have miscalculated this, by the way— the Commander is barely hanging on and Griffin is. Losing. It. I think she might be in love.”

Ugh.

It’s not like Nia is incapable of love, whatever people say: she loves her house, and she loves the feeling she gets when people do what she says. The rush is better than an orgasm— colder, and more practical. Feeling it for a person is part she’s never quite grasped.

“And I care because?”

“It gave me an idea.” Roan starts pacing, gesturing more wildly than anyone should. If he knocks over any of her Czech crystal, she’s going to be pissed. “I call her, and tell her that you finally trust me enough to tell me where they are. She and however many of her people go storming out— they’ll leave some behind with Lexa. The City people chase them— leaving a few to keep the ones in the house from escaping— and then they drive the others into a building somewhere. I know you and Ontari have wanted to meet them, right?”

In truth, it was always Carl’s crusade. Nia only wanted to buy out their building, decentralize them — and make money doing it— so that they’d be less likely to interfere, or make the connection to Dr. Tsing. She’d let Carl do what he wanted. But then they’d moved in with the Commander, and that had made them important.

So, no. She wouldn’t mind meeting some of them. Figuring out just what Lexa sees in them. What they’re capable of— and what she and her people could be capable of, if they can recreate what was done to them.
And it’s not a bad idea to get them out of that house, either. Pinned and scared and pitiful, Sky Crew will start killing soon. Losing all that data would be tedious.

“Do they have radios? Ways to communicate?”

Roan shrugs. “Probably.”

“Then the ones staying guard can’t attack, or Griffin will turn around.”

“What if they save the Commander?”

ALIE had been able to confirm at least five bullets made contact. If Sky Crew is so desperate, than her survival isn’t likely. But— “Even if they do, she was shot several times. Hard to act like she’s all that when she can’t move half her limbs or pee on her own.”

Roan might be betraying her, of course. She’s not stupid enough to do something like trust her son. He’s always been softer than she wanted. That’s why she’d taken such an interest in Ontari: she’d been scheming, even as a child. Moreso after Nia had had her parents killed. She’d thought that the competition would push Roan to do better, and it had, but not near enough. One will have to take out the other eventually, of course: they both know too much, and there can’t be two heirs to the Frost empire. Luckily for them, Nia has no plans to die any time soon. But Lexa will, whether or not Griffin is there to cry over her in her final moments.

“Make the call.”

He grins and dials, putting the phone on speaker. She picks up after one ring.

“Yo, Griff.”

“This had better be real fuckin’ good, Roan,” Griffin says. There’s a lot of yelling in the background, and Nia settles in her recliner, pulling the lever to tilt it back.

“Should be.” Roan smirks. “I found out where the servers are.”

“Hold her still,” someone shouts, and Griffin makes a choking sound.

“Two minutes ago you—”

“She ordered extra security to the Frostech building on thirteenth street, in Azgeda. Big industrial building, lots of fans, lots of computers.”

Pause. “I’ll be there.” The statement was probably meant to sound forceful or threatening, but he comes out as tearful instead. This is the child that Carl has been so worked up about? Nia had already known Carl was a bit ridiculous, but. Really. “Can you get there? I could use some backup.”

“You could— are you fucking kidding me?” A man’s voice says. “You’re going alone?”

Nia frowns. Roan spreads his hands, making a face.

“You guys need to stay here and protect Lexa—”

“What, so you can help by getting us all killed? This is suicide! You don’t even trust Roan, you said that just now!”

“If I don’t try—” And there’s another scream in the background.
“Clarke. She’s going to die anyway!” the man continues. “Getting yourself killed too—”

“Shut up, Bellamy!”

Bellamy.

Bellamy?

What an idiot name.

“—If it works, it’ll save you too. It’ll save all of you. It’s not just about her.”

“Shut up! You just said— did Roan hear that?”

“No, I muted it, wait— shit—”

It goes quiet.

“Bellamy,” Roan says, lips twitching. For the first time in a long time Nia remembers that they’re related, that she grew him herself, pushed him out of her body early on one Thursday morning.

Maybe she’ll root for him against Ontari. Just a bit.

Clarke ends the call. Her hands aren’t shaking anymore. Good. That’s good, then.

“Okay,” she says, nodding. “Okay.”

“So how do we do this?” Bellamy asks. “You go, then some of us sneak out the roof—”

No. No, what? “Bell—”

“She was serious about going alone,” Indra says, like everyone here is very stupid. Maybe they are, but the City has slowed their attacks, so at least something is working.

“What— but— Lexa’s fine?”

“We’re going to need defense,” Monty says, picking up where Clarke left off. “And now Clarke has said she’s going by herself, they’ll be suspicious if there’s more.”

It’s so weird that the window is bricked up. Who bricks up their bedroom window?

“How much time do you need?” Clarke asks Monty. “Don’t tell me the plan, just in case— just—”

He makes a face. “I don’t know. As long as you can give us.”

Right. Okay.

“Okay,” she says. Nods. Looks at Indra, because Indra seems like she’s good at strategy and knows what makes sense: she nods at Indra and Indra nods back and that feels like a victory of some sort. So she turns again, reaching up and hugging Bellamy. “Take care of them.”

“Jesus, Clarke,” Connor says.
Bellamy clings back, like he can prevent her leaving, like he can hold their twisted history in his arms. But he lets go when she pulls back, and stares at the wall.

She hugs Monty next. Briefly. He’s still typing away.

And then—

Her mother.

God, Abby.

Abby’s still half bent over Lexa, but her face crumples when Clarke steps up to her, and Clarke isn’t going to cry, she can’t— she’s been faking the tears before but if she actually starts for real, it’ll be all over, and this room, this weird little room in this abandoned house doesn’t get to see her tears, not now, not when she has to save everyone inside it.

“I just got you back,” Abby says, sounding like she’s the one that’s been shot.

“I’ll be okay.” She has no way of being okay. “I love you.”

She has to pull harder to get away. And then there’s Indra, who reaches out for a handshake— it’s a surprise, it’s an honor, she thinks, and Indra nods at her again.

And then there’s Lexa.

Bloody and alive and she probably needs some food, something to start restoring the blood that she’s lost but before Clarke can suggest it Lexa’s grabbed her shirt and yanked her down and is kissing her and kissing her and she’s not asking her to stay, she’s not asking her to be careful because Lexa understands when to go with her head and her heart and this is the first category. She won’t make Clarke feel guilty, because Clarke is going to do the job.

God, Clarke loves her so much.

She can’t say anything now. It’s a douche move. But if she survives—

Clarke lingers for an extra few seconds before pulling away. Turning. Bellamy has discovered an interest in the ceiling. Indra is still staring resolutely at the door. Abby looks like she did right after Clarke’s dad died, and she can’t do this, she nods again (stop fucking nodding, Clarke,) and then opens the door to the living room. Closes it quickly.

Harper’s on her, then, a little close to crying, and Octavia is acting like she doesn’t care but she does, she obviously does— Clarke gets away with sort of back pats for the rest of them. They’re her family. They’re her family and they’ve been through worse together.

She just has to get them out of this.

No.

She has to trust her mother and Monty to get them out of this.

“How do I get out of here?” she asks, because the barricade currently consists of every piece of furniture in the place. Including the stove. There’s a refrigerator blocking the front entrance, and a washing machine backing up the stove by the garage. Moving any of it would make it hard to defend again.

“We didn’t actually plan for an escape route,” Murphy says. “We figured it was a final stand kind
“Unless…” Miller frowns at the fireplace, a classic brick one that Clarke had discounted as ornamental. He looks from the wall above it, then back to Clarke again, like he’s sizing her up. “It’d be tight, but you could probably make it.”

“Or,” Connor says, “Siren could just break the skylight like a civilized person, and we can hope they don’t drop a bomb through the roof.”

Clarke hadn’t noticed the skylight. Clarke hadn’t noticed a lot of things about this room when she came in, too focused on Lexa. She’s starting to wonder, though, whose house it was. Between the secure bedroom and Indra’s reluctance to elaborate, she’s starting to guess.

Harper whistles.

“I think it’s bulletproof,” she says. “Who the hell has bulletproof glass in their skylight?”

“Can you do it?”

“Yeah, hang on.” She looks at Clarke, then away, and Clarke sees how she considers, just for a second, pretending that she can’t. Keeping Clarke in with them.

But they have a plan. And Nia is waiting.

Harper’s second whistle sends the glass falling to the carpet.

“Okay,” Clarke says, yet again. And jumps.

The wind smacks her when she gets to the roof, and she peeks over the edge. True to form, ALIE’s people aren’t making an actual effort to break in, just milling about by the doors and windows.

“Wire, Bishop, you copy?” she asks, leaning back again. She’ll have to make an obvious exit that looks like it’s trying to be stealthy.

“Yeah,” Raven says. “I’ve got the map pulled up.” She doesn’t sound weepy, thank God. Clarke doesn’t think she could handle it.

“Tell me when to turn,” she says.

The wind is crazy.

And blowing north.

Clarke makes a show of looking down, and then she jumps again.

Tucking herself into the wind, she starts to fly.

Abby’s got a knife pressed against the back of her neck.

It’s the obvious choice.
They couldn’t put that thing in anyone else without requiring surgery. Lexa will just— heal around it, like she’s healing around the bullet still in her side, like she’s still dizzy with blood loss but that’s fine, because she has to pull through here. Otherwise Clarke— and Aden—

“Go,” Lexa says. The only allowance she gives herself is twisting her hand in the sheet that had once been Gustus’s, before she took a knife to his neck.

And then Abby is pressing in the black chip, and she can feel all the little wires springing out of it, working their way into her head, and it’s a thousand migraines, squeezing her brain and behind her eyes and she’s just been shot several times over and it hurt less, she’s dying, fuck, it’s going to kill her and Clarke has died for nothing but it’s not killing her she’s just—

She’s just—

Unable to keep it in anymore, Lexa screams.

Chapter End Notes

alternate name for this chapter: Do You Hear The People Tsing?
Lexa wants to think of Clarke’s boobs, just to be an asshole, but before she can think better of it she realizes that she’s effectively already done it.

Eventually, Lexa stops screaming.

It’s not that the pain has stopped, it’s that her throat has gone dry, and she’s feeling very self-conscious about the whole thing. Her neck is healing around the chip, pulling skin and muscles, and it feels like something is crawling through her head—

But she’s not going to keep screaming.

She limits herself to a grunt.

“Is it any better?” Abby asks hesitantly. Lexa wants to stab her in the brain and see how she feels, but she restrains herself.

“No.” And it’s Monty who says it. He’s frowning at something on his laptop. “Pain signals are going haywire. Hang on—”

And then the pain really does start to stop.

She also gets the sense that she’s just smoked a whole lot of weed.


“Sorry. I’m trying to figure out how to calibrate this thing.”

Because he can now control her brain.

Jesus Christ.

The stoned feeling ebbs, though. She looks to Indra, hoping for a bit of sanity, or at least that look she gets when everyone is being ridiculous, but Indra’s jaw is tight. She’s worried, and Indra always makes a point of not looking worried.

“We need to establish a baseline,” Monty says. “So that we can know if ALIE tries to access something. They have a list of… diagnostic questions? The chip will tell us what parts of your brain activate, and then the program translates that for us, I think—”

“Monty just increased your dopamine levels.” And Lexa had worked as much out herself. She’s not a neurologist, but she did grow up in a hospital. Maybe her annoyance flashes on the computer screen, because Abby stops talking and frowns at her.

“Sorry,” Lexa says. She’s not sure she should be apologizing for what she thinks. She hasn’t been
Catholic in a long time. But she’s sitting in Gustus’s bed with Becca’s freaky technology in her skull and—

And thinking about Gustus must have set off another signal because Abby is frowning even more now.

“Ask me the questions,” Lexa says. Time to get this over with.

Because any second Clarke could be—

“What’s your name?” Abby asks.

So it’s like a polygraph. Or at least, a polygraph on TV. The question is probably causing her brain to go haywire, because what the fuck name is she supposed to give? “Lexa.” She doesn’t think her internal monologue usually swears this much, when there isn’t someone to monitor it.

“What city are we in?”

“Polis.”

“Who is the President?”

“Barack Obama.”

She breathes.

When she was little, Clarke wanted to fly. She read Peter Pan and Harry Potter and imagined soaring through the air, not limited by roads or buildings or people. Imagined it as complete freedom.

It’s not what she had expected.

It’s not like she hadn’t wondered, earlier, if she could do this. If she could tuck herself into the wind and let herself get carried away like she’s a Katy Perry lyric or a wayward kite. But she’s always been in danger of crashing, always in danger of being caught, always been something—

Nothing like desperation, really.

The wind at her back is twisting her hair into knots, and she wonders if this is what being in a jet stream feels like, in a riptide, in a—

“Building is about half a quarter mile two o’clock,” Raven says. They’d switched her over to the private channel so that she couldn’t hear what they’re planning, back at the safehouse— so they wouldn’t just hear the roaring of the wind. And she can’t think about what’s happening back there, she just has to think about—

Landing.

She hadn’t really thought out the landing too much.

Gradually, Clarke drops herself down to earth.
“Okay. Now I’m going to list some names, so that we can map where your brain reacts to them, so that we can block ALIE from changing those responses. In theory. Um. I don’t know everyone, obviously, so Indra, can you just fill in?”

Jesus.

Lexa tries to stay calm so that they won’t see how much she’s freaking out at this— she’s being dissected, and it would be one thing if it was just Indra, or Clarke, but Monty’s here and Abby’s watching and Homer— whose name is Bellamy, apparently, which is fucking hilarious— are all hovering about, not to mention the rest of Sky Crew on the comms and everyone back at the tower.

“Go for it,” she says, when she realizes they’re waiting for permission.

The sooner they get this over with—

Clarke must be still alive, otherwise ALIE would have renewed its attack, right?

“Mother,” Abby says, and the joke’s on her because she’s the only real maternal reference Lexa has. “Father. Clarke.” And Lexa can’t look at her, because they’re going to be able to track when she was thinking about Clarke earlier and that’s just— that’s just— “Becca. Monty. Sky Crew. Indra.” And then Abby nods at the woman in question.


“Slow down,” Abby mutters.

“Aden. Nyko.” She doesn’t bring up Gustus, but shit, Lexa’s already thought of him, and so she throws it out there herself. Indra’s hand twitches, like she’s thought about patting Lexa’s shoulder.

Does she look that pathetic?

Or is it just because Indra’s got a view of the computer screen, which is apparently reflecting her every thought?

Hopefully they can get the chip out of her, afterwards, with all its little tentacles in her brain. She can’t live like this.

(If they live.)

“Tell us a lie about yourself.”

“I was born in Swaziland.”

“Okay. And tell us something true about yourself.” Abby frowns again— probably, Lexa’s supposed to have more of a stress reaction to telling a lie, but Lexa just has to sort through all the truths that can hurt her (Aden, Clarke, Becca) and try and find something innocent, but nothing’s innocent, and Abby is frowning even more. Lexa wants to think of Clarke’s boobs, just to be an asshole, but before she can think better of it she realizes that she’s effectively already done it. Sure enough, Abby’s face turns a funny color.

“I’ve never seen Casablanca,” Lexa says. To distract herself from Clarke’s boobs, she thinks about
how she’ll probably never see them— or Clarke— again, because Clarke is making a last stand somewhere and Lexa didn’t ask her to come back because victory stands on the back of sacrifice, and they need a victory.

God. Clarke.

Clarke lands hard on the flat roof, boots catching the noise. She doesn’t think she’s told Raven how great the boots are often enough, or how great Raven is, but she can’t start now. If she does, it’s going to feel like some take care of my Ashley moment, and nobody would be comfortable with that. Nobody should ever be comfortable with Gone With The Wind in general.

“I’m going in,” is what Clarke manages to say. But she said goodbye to the rest of Sky Crew, she can’t just— “We’ll do our best to save your dad, Bishop.” But he’s smart, and he’s gotten to know her faster than almost anyone, Lexa included, so he interrupts.

“We’re staying on comms with you, right? I thought—”

“I don’t want them to have any way to get to you guys, if— it’s safer.”

She doesn’t want them to listen to her die.

“If you need to get in touch—” Raven starts.

“I’ll steal a phone from somewhere.”

She wants to say something flippant— something like see you on the other side, but she doesn’t think anyone is ready for afterlife humor.

Jesus.

She’s going to die. And Lexa— and her mom—

You’re saving them.

Clarke takes a deep breath. Tries not to count down how many of those she has left.

“Clarke,” Raven says, but she doesn’t follow it up with anything.

“Bye, guys,” Clarke manages. It’s not eloquent. But she takes the comm out of her ear anyway, and bites down on it as hard as she can, working the sharp bits with her tongue to corrode them as much as possible. Then she spits them onto the ground and grinds them under her heel.

Bridge: burned.

Clarke hasn’t been this alone in a long, long time.

Even at Mount Weather, she’d had Murphy.

The warehouse roof doesn’t come equipped with a convenient door. Which is unfortunate— any
good trap should have an easy method of access, although Clarke supposes they might expect her to come crashing in through one of the vents. Or through the door on the ground, like a normal person.

But if that’s where they expect her—

She looks down at her boots. They’re specially made to muffle the sound of a landing, and she wonders how much they can take.

It’s a day for trying new things.

She’d once been so heavy they’d needed a fork life to move her. And that was when she was unconscious.

So she jumps.

And then yanks herself back towards the ground as hard as she can.

It’s a good, solid roof. They could probably land helicopters on this roof.

But it wasn’t made for tonnes of pressure landing on one square foot.

Clarke jumps again.

Cracks appear under her feet, and in the soles of her boots.

She’s going to die today, but God, the rush almost makes it worth it. She’d never really thought about the limits of what she could do, not until Lexa had held her palm against Clarke’s bare skin and laughed at the feeling. She might never be able to expand her gravitational field, but—

Well.

Give her an inch and she’ll take the fucking roof down.

And down.

Down she goes, the ground falling away beneath her. It’s harder than it usually is, pulling away from the earth so that even as she falls with the cement, she’s not going to land with it— but in this second, she’s descending in a beam of sunlight.


“Yeah.”

At least he’s one person she can protect. “You guys take the chopper off the roof. Go somewhere — don’t tell me, don’t tell anyone, and don’t turn around until, um…” if this all goes horribly wrong, and ALIE takes over her brain, “Indra and Anya both tell you it’s safe to come back.”

“You have a helicopter?” that sounds like Wire.

“No, I’m staying here.”
“Wrong.” She doesn’t care if he thinks he’s psychic— she doesn’t care if he is psychic. If ALIE gets into her head, it’s going to know exactly how to manipulate her. Clarke may be lost to her now, but they can’t have Aden.

She doesn’t think she could survive it.

And if Clarke is alive, and she ends up chipped too—

The threat to Aden would be the same.

*Stay in the game, Alexis.*

“**Come on, Aden,**” she hears Titus saying.

“**No,**” Aden’s weepy tone goes into full on crying— he’s trying to hide it, she can tell by the hiccups, and she doesn’t want to know what the mind-reading machine is saying about her now.

Probably something similar to what happened in Abby’s head just a little while ago. Saying goodbye to your child for what might be the last time.

Except Aden isn’t hers—

Fuck it.

Fuck it, he is. He’s her only family and he’s going to get through this.

“Aden.” She tries to be as gentle as she can. It’d be nice if Monty wanted to give her some more digital weed right about now, but he looks like he has no idea what he’s supposed to be doing at this point. Which is fair. Lexa twists Gustus’s sheets between her fingers. “You did good warning everyone earlier, okay? But I can’t do anything else until I know you’re safe, and we don’t have time to argue about it. I love you. So please, go get in the goddam chopper.”

“**I love you too,**” Aden sniffs, and then there’s the sound of shuffling and a door closing.

“**They’re gone,**” Anya says after a moment.

Yes. They are.

Monty’s holding out one of the ALIE chips now— probably the one Clarke got after beating up Lexa’s people, a few days before they ever met.

God. So much has changed these last few months.

She’d stormed into Kane’s precinct to set up a business meeting, and her life went completely out of orbit: it’s a cliched metaphor, but it applies so well to the woman who can control gravity. With that kind of pull, were they inevitable? Their histories had already been running parallel.

Maybe if she was a better person, she would have insisted Clarke stay. Maybe that’s what she was supposed to do, but Clarke would have never done anything different and Lexa...

Lexa reaches out.
The ground floor is rows and rows of servers, creating tunnels—no way to see who’s around the corner, and nowhere to dodge or get out of the way if they have a gun. Clarke wonders if she’d have better luck from the rafters, but she’s got a limited number of darts and they have an unlimited number of minions. One of them would hit her eventually.

And she’s not here to win.

She’s just here to draw it out.

Still, she shoots the first person she sees: he jumps out at the end of her tunnel and charges her. It’s only when he’s fallen—(Latino man, mid fifties, wedding ring, ugly tie,) that she figures out that he was holding a taser and not a gun. She can’t assume it’s the same for the rest of them, though: her buzzer hums steadily, warning her of others.

She’s supposed to think that these are the City servers, right?

Maybe she should be setting them on fire or something.

But there’s no time because there are people coming at her from both directions—she shoots one of the guys in front of her and ducks the swing of the next one, letting him crash into the woman who’s just come in from the other end. She slams her foot into the man’s back, shoving both him and the woman over, and then stamps down heavy on his leg.

He doesn’t cry out. He can’t feel it.

But she doubts you can really stand on a broken leg, even if it doesn’t hurt.

They’re still trying to untangle themselves, and Clarke runs, gun up. The soles of her boots are completely wrecked.

Another group is on her.

Block.

Punch.

Shoot.

She throws one guy into a server with enough force that it falls over.

Kick.

Run.

Survive.

God, she wants to survive.

But she’s out of darts and left a trail of unconscious bodies to show for it but there’s more, there’s always more, and she’s got a foot on the back of her legs and her arms twisted behind her as she’s shoved to the ground. Her buzzer is trying to claw its way off her side and surely they’ll be able to feel it now, but that doesn’t matter, and she could grow heavier but that would just pull everything down on top of her—

She hopes her mom and Lexa are close to doing whatever they’re going to do, because ALIE still seems perfectly in control.
The woman walking towards her now doesn’t have the same vacant expressions as the chipped ones. She’s young—maybe Octavia’s age. She looks a bit like Octavia too, with long dark hair and a square jaw, but everything else is wrong. She’s got scars on her face and ice in her eyes.

“Nice,” the woman says, gesturing to the lines on her cheeks. “We match.”

Clarke grits her teeth. “Do I know you?”

“Oh. I’m Ontari. I’d shake your hand, but…”

And she’s a monologuer. That’s—great, actually. Clarke tries desperately to remember what she knows of Ontari—she’s Nia’s protege and Roan’s rival, and she shares Nia’s bloodthirsty streak. And apparently, she likes to grandstand. Likes power.

“I’d say it’s nice to meet you,” Clarke says, in the same tone, “but…” Get her talking. Get her talking about herself.

“Gotta say, I wasn’t expecting you to show up.”

The woman holding her arm twists it a little. It isn’t necessary.

Does ALIE have the power to be petty?

“Yeah, you were probably expecting Roan.” Ontari smiles again. Nobody’s smile should be that overdone. “Sorry about that.” She clearly leaves it ambiguous, whether Roan betrayed Sky Crew or Nia caught him. It’s a bit of a comfort—it means Ontari doesn’t know that Roan had actually triple-crossed them, and that’s good, isn’t it? It might not matter much longer, but it means that at least if it all goes to shit, at least someone will be standing.

Although if Clarke had to choose, she wouldn’t have chosen Roan.

She couldn’t have chosen. But there was never a choice. She just got to choose who to send to die, and she’d chosen herself, because of practical reasons. And maybe because she doesn’t want to be the one left behind.

“So, Skylark,” Ontari says. And then she grins a little. “Skylark. It’s kind of twee, isn’t it?”

Clarke doesn’t know what twee means, but she thinks it’s rich coming from someone whose name is a Canadian province minus one letter. Did her parents just think nobody would notice? But—keep her talking, keep her talking.“What can I do for you?” There’s at least four people behind Ontari in their little corridor, probably more. She isn’t sure why they haven’t tranqued her yet—

Ontari pulls out a chip, holding it between her index and middle finger.

Oh.

Oh fuck no.

“No way in hell,” Clarke says, and she tries twisting away automatically. Wants to start breaking necks on principle, despite how futile it would be. “No.”

Someone catches her mouth before she can close it, squeezing her jaw.

“The mistake Emerson made was letting you stay you,” Ontari says. “It’s going to be so much easier to cooperate when you actually want to. Watching you fight, that was really educational. We could do so much more with you. Make more of you. You just gotta work with us a bit.”

Make more? Nine out of ten of the hundred ended up dead. Though it’s not like ALIE is short on
test subjects.

“I won’t take it,” Clarke says. It comes out unintelligible, but she thinks Ontari understands the sentiment— and Wells had been right, hadn’t he? You had to take it willingly? Or at least sort of? Because she won’t, she won’t. They broke down her body and put it back together as a weapon, but they won’t have her mind, they won’t take Abby and Lexa and Sky Crew and Wells and turn her into whatever Wallace had originally planned—

One of the ALIEbots says something about unwilling subjects to Ontari, but Clarke can’t catch all of it, except that they’re going to use her as a guinea pig again and she won’t let them, she won’t let them—

She slams her heavy head into the person holding it, but there’s another one, and she pulls down hard on the hands holding her but they don’t fucking feel it, just squat for better support and Ontari is shoving the chip into her mouth before covering it with her palm, and Clarke can feel it working its way into her cheek and moving up and she thinks no, and she thinks no, and she can’t scream out loud but she imagines it in her head, as loud as she can—

Lexa looks back to Indra. She isn’t sure what she’s hoping for, but Indra just nods at her a little. So Lexa swallows.

Puts the chip on her tongue.

It doesn’t hurt like the other one did: she can feel it as she holds it against the roof of her mouth, sending whatever the fuck it is up to her brain, but at least it doesn’t feel like she’s going to die from it.

“Hold to the baseline,” Monty is muttering, clicking more frantically than Lexa is comfortable with. “Don’t you dare—”

And two computer programs are fighting over her brain, that’s cool, but when she unfocuses her eyes she’s not in Gustus’s bedroom anymore. Instead she’s outside, on the street of a city she’s never been to— although it looks weirdly like Vancouver— and when she takes a step forward she can feel herself move, but also feel herself sitting on the bed.

“What the hell,” she says. She’d expected the City of Light to look a little more like— well, it’s hard to say. But more. Maybe like Paris.

Lexa, can you hear us?

She can hear Monty’s voice, but she can’t see him— and then she tenses and his silhouette flickers in the corner. She nods, but she doesn’t know if it’s real-Lexa or avatar-Lexa doing the nodding. Because the version of her that’s standing isn’t her: She’s wearing pajamas, for some reason, and her hair feels way cleaner than it actually is after all that blood.

So she’s in the City. But she’s still herself.

At least, she thinks she’s herself.
And someone is screaming.

She weaves through clean alleyways towards the sound— there’s something about it, something she can’t ignore, even if she can’t put her finger on— and then she comes out into a plaza and there’s—

*Clarke.*

“Clarke.”

She hadn’t thought of Clarke since she’d taken the chip, and that might be the longest she hasn’t since she met her—

**Stop thinking about Clarke, I’m trying to keep ALIE away from her, just count to a hundred or something.**

But she can’t because,

“Clarke!”

There are other people here, the first she’s seen besides the two of them, and they’re surrounding her: Clarke is on her knees, hands over her ears, and she doesn’t react, just keeps screaming—

Lexa moves.

Lexa moves before she’s thought about it, but maybe that’s Monty’s doing— she doesn’t care anymore, because she’s got her knives in her hands all of a sudden, and she’s pulling the people away from Clarke, standing over her, blades out and visible and threatening.

They won’t have her.

Clarke's here, but she’s fighting it, and Lexa will kill everyone here before she lets them win. Before she lets them turn Clarke into something else. Because in another life, Lexa may have started and stopped wars for Clarke, but in this one— in this one, in this moment, in this alternate reality or wherever the fuck she is, all she can do is fight. And love.

God, she *loves*—

She loves with a force that’s probably overridden all of Monty’s blocks, she loves and there’s no way ALIE isn’t picking up on it— she loves and she *loves* and somehow, somehow, the attacks have stopped, the people are backing away from them. She doesn’t trust it, but she doesn’t have time to question it, either: she places one hand on Clarke’s shoulder, as gently as she can.

Clarke hasn’t changed. She’s still wearing her Skylark suit, and her hair is a disaster. It’s another good sign, Lexa hopes— that the City hasn’t gotten into her head like it’s gone into Lexa’s pajamas. They could have at least put her in her Commander suit and mask— and as soon as she thinks it, her clothes change. She can feel her mask’s familiar pressure on her face.

She should be terrified at that. She hopes the lack of terror is Monty’s doing and not ALIE’s, but if there’s enough of her to hope, then maybe there’s enough of her to get them out of this.

Chapter End Notes
I'm so sorry this took so long: I've finally finished my thesis, and my goal is to get this done before graduation, so updates should be more frequent. I apologize for the Katy Perry reference, I've just always wondered what a plastic bag floating in the wind FEELS like.

I've also realized that I missed this fic's one year birthday. It should not have taken this long. When Will My Life Come Home From The War. To those who have stuck with me this whole time-- you're great. To those reading in the future-- cool! I'm glad that people are still here for this pairing, whatever canon might be doing to them.

Anyway. Next up, Anya, Raven and Wells remind you that they're badasses too. And a fun little thought experiment: if the City of Light is a hive mind, did Lexa just force everyone to fall in love with Clarke?
You, Robot part 1

Chapter Summary

God save Anya from this nonsense.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Wire and Python aren't going to be able to hack the system remotely.

They’d all hung their hopes on Becca’s device being able to somehow patch them into ALIE’s system, and Anya can feel precious minutes slipping away from her.

Nia wants to take in Sky Crew alive, that’s obvious enough. She probably wants them mostly unharmed as well, so she won’t have to deal with the extra medical cost. The best way to do that is to send Skylark back to them, all chipped and happy and threatening to kill herself if they don’t turn themselves in. Lexa says Skylark’s resisting ALIE right now, but they’re on borrowed time.

Lexa and Indra are on borrowed time.

Anya surveys her assets.

They are, in no particular order:

1. Sky Crew member who still cannot stand for more than five minutes without getting nauseous.

1. Sky Crew member with two knives hidden in her clothes, vast mechanical knowledge and a bum knee.

1. Civilian who is throwing a chess piece from hand to hand, scowling at the wall.


Titus and Aden have taken the helicopter. She’s got her bike in the garage, but it’s going to be hard getting out. And her leg is going to hurt like a motherfucker if she folds it onto the motorbike for very long, but that’s just how it’s going to be.

“We need to go to Nia’s house,” she says. Kenny can guard Jasper, and she can work with the other two: Jaha has no experience to speak of, but at least Sky Crew have taught him to punch, and hopefully he can pull a trigger or two.

They, however, are not following her logical leaps.

“What?” Wire asks.

“They’re not getting into the system. We don’t have much time. So we need to go.”

“And you think there’s going to be something at Nia’s house?” Jaha asks, slapping the rook into one palm with more force than before.
“She has to have a way to control ALIE in case of emergency.” And Anya would be honored to practice enhanced interrogation. She hasn’t had to do that since they ratified the Coalition, but it’s hard to forget how. “So we’re going to go and ask.”

“Um,” Wire says. “We?” she points to herself, and then at Jaha.

Oh.

She probably stopped doing physical missions when she hurt her leg.

Probably never even considered that she could.

It’s kind of sad, but Anya doesn’t have time to work past years of internalized ableism. “You and Jaha. Jasper stays and mans the comms. Nia’s house is farther north, so we might need him to relay. Get the screen-share program on a flash drive and let’s move.”

Wire and Jaha look at each other for a moment, and then at Jasper.

And then they move.

“This is Anya,” Anya says into the comm. She doesn’t remember if she has a nickname, and she can’t be fucked to make up a new one. “Wire, Bishop and I are going to the Frost house.”

“What?” Homer yelps.

“Good plan,” Indra says. “Keep us updated.”

She’ll keep the rest of Sky Crew in line. Indra deserves better than to be stuck with babysitting, but that’s where they’ve fallen out right now. Anya would like to get Lincoln as well, but he could be across town for all she knows, and three is already pushing the number of people that will fit on her bike.

“They’re watching all the exits,” Wire says. “Do you have like, a secret tunnel out of here or something?”

That would be nice.

“No,” Anya says. “I sort of thought we’d shoot as many as we could and run over the rest.”

“Then they’ll all follow us.” Wire jabs the elevator button. “And Nia would know we’re coming.”

It’s weird to get into the elevator without Kenny putting them through the third degree. But he’s in the apartment now. If the entire City comes for Jasper, Kenny isn’t going to be able to do shit about it, but it’s better than leaving Jasper with nothing. And it’s pointless to guard Lexa’s empty apartment.

“What if they don’t know we’ve left?” Jaha asks, slowly.

“No way to avoid that, I’m afraid.” Security footage had shown at least ten people on the parking garage exit. “Even if we take them all down the rest of the City will know we’re out.”
“They’ll know someone left.” Jaha grins. “There’s like, six hundred people that live in this building, right? So they don’t have to know it’s us. We need to run back to the apartment and get a couple things.”

They don’t have time. “Are you—”

“Trust me. Lincoln and I pulled this off a while back. Works great.”

“WOOO-HOOO!” Wire shrieks, clinging to Anya’s back, waving an empty bottle over her head. “WHAT’S UP, BITCHES?”

Indra must never, ever find out about this.

Jaha is on the back, silly string in one hand and a speaker with a bone-shattering level of bass in the background. “WOOO!” He yells, with slightly less verve.

Lincoln, however, must be told. Anya dearly wants to hear the story of how they first used this technique.

She also wants to know why Sky Crew had silly string lying around.

They tear through the row of ALIEs, and they don’t even get a dirty look: there must not be annoyance at young hooligans in the City of Light. And then they’re on the road, speeding down streets that are emptier than usual, in a city quieter than usual, and Anya focuses on not letting her leg hurt.

The odds are, she’s going to get shot again tonight.

She really does not want to get shot.

She hadn’t seen it coming, the first time. The bullet had shattered her knee, and it had taken the VA years to get it working again.

Sometimes she can still taste the dirt she’d landed in.

The instinct is to spit, but if she spits it’s just going to hit the inside of her helmet. So she just drives faster.

They make the twenty minute trip in ten.

There is a lot of swerving involved, and all things considered, it might be a good thing that the police officers are all being mind controlled by an evil robot with better things to pay attention to.

The first problem: the fence.

It’s not a particularly high fence, but Anya and Wire can’t climb it. They had to leave the bike
about half a block away, and Anya was right about her leg. It’s cramping like a motherfucker.

“Give me a few minutes and I could probably blow a hole in it,” Wire says. She starts patting her pockets, pulling out small plastic bags.

“That’ll bring them all running,” she says.

“Not if they’re still bufferi—”

“You’re not blowing a hole in the fence. Anyway, we might need that later.” Anya looks back to the gate. There’s a guard there, in a little booth, with one of those lever car gates. Like it’s a parking garage. They could just walk around that gate, if the guard seeing them wouldn’t alert the ALIE.

“I could distract him,” Jaha says. “Climb the fence and stand behind him— he turns and looks at me and you guys sneak through. I could convince ALIE I’m here on my own.”

“It would see through that.” Not a bad plan as far as plans go, though. “You go over the fence and tranq him.”

A car drives by, and they all freeze, trying to look as though they're supposed to be there. They should have worn orange vests-- nobody is ever suspicious of someone in an orange vest, but it's too late now. The car doesn't stop.

“If Wells shoots him, ALIE’s going to know we’re here anyway,” Wire hisses.

“We’ll just have to hope it’s scanning for our faces and not paying attention to every minion who faints.” They have to gamble on ALIE’s processing power: that it’s focusing on patching whatever Lexa’s infecting it with, and won’t pay attention to one satellite data going offline.

They’ll just have to be fast.

Jaha scales the fence in a few seconds, hauling himself over the top— and then flops over the other side, landing with a thud and a muffled curse.

“Approaching,” he whispers over the comms.

“You guys all still alive?” Jasper asks. “The others want to know.”

“Still alive,” Wire mutters. “Attempting infiltration. Thanks for the confidence. Tell Shadow to tell Abe that we used his noisy shtick to great success.”

Lincoln’s fucking code name is Abe. That’s even worse than Goggles. God save Anya from this nonsense.

“You owe me new silly string.”

“Guard is down,” Jaha says. “I don’t think he saw me, but I had to leave cover because the only opening was through the back.”

It’ll do. Anya and Wire go around to the front as quickly as they can. Wire’s pain is worse than Anya’s: it’s easy to tell from how she walks, but she doesn’t say anything.

If Anya gets out of this without getting shot, arrested or killed, she’s going to take such a long bath.

But first.
They squeeze through the gap between the gate and the booth, and since they were probably picked up by security cameras there, there’s no point in hiding as they go up the drive to the house.

No one comes to intercept them.

The front door is unguarded and unlocked: inside, two Azgeda goons are staring vacantly at the wall, and Wire tranqs them before they have time to blink. Anya bolts the front door behind them. It won’t slow down anyone for long, but it might give them a few minutes: the door is heavily reinforced, which makes the fact that it was open even weirder.

“Overconfidence?” Jaha asks, sounding more like he thinks the answer is their impending deaths.

Anya can only shrug.

The Frost mansion tries to live up to its name, with cool blue color schemes where others might be yellow and gold. It's all shining silver banisters and cut crystal chandeliers. The resulting effect almost tricks Anya into thinking she’s cold.

She’s looked at the blueprints of this place, and at one time she thought that she would have to send someone to assassinate the residents. So she’s pretty sure which rooms are Nia’s, and gestures with the tip of her glock to the door at the top of a curved staircase.

Wire grimaces a bit. Even her ponytail looks pained.

Anya can relate.

She grits her teeth and leads the march up the stairs.

Nia’s door is unlocked.

It’s definitely getting weirder, and smelling more like a trap, but they’ve committed and so Anya bursts in first, gun high. Jaha and Wire come in just a step behind her— and it’s… it’s been a long time since she had backup instead of being the backup herself.

She’s missed it, a little bit.

Nia rolls her head around from where she’s been sitting on the couch— and then jumps up, nearly knocking over one of her many figurines.

“Don’t move,” Anya orders.

Slowly, Nia puts her hand in the air, but she manages to look smug even as she does it.

Still no sign that they’ve sprung a trap.

“How do you control ALIE?” It’s best to get to the point quickly.

A pause.

Wire twitches like she’s going to step forward, but she doesn’t.
“I’m going to count to three,” Anya says, making a show of putting her finger on the trigger. She’d cock the gun for emphasis, except it’s already cocked, because she’s not an amateur and you don’t point a loaded gun at somebody unless you’re prepared to fire it.

And she’s prepared.

It’s loaded with bullets, not with darts. Nia in pain is going to be more helpful to them than Nia unconscious.

“One.” She’s good at getting information out of people. She doesn’t usually have to torture them, and she doesn’t want to have to here: no matter what happens, the police and the government are going to be involved in the aftermath of this— despite not showing up to stop it— and the fewer crimes can be pinned on her and Lexa, the better off they’re going to be. All of this hinges on Nia’s confession, and that confession could be considered invalid if Anya has to hurt her first.

“Two.” But that doesn’t mean she won’t. Anya will spend the rest of her life in jail if she has to. It’s obviously better than letting Nia Frost literally mind control the entire world.

“There’s a room downstairs,” Nia says. “There’s a control panel set up there.”

Could be a trap.

Anya looks at her backup, makes a decision, and hands Jaha her gun. Takes a handful of zip ties out of her pocket.

“Make one wrong move and he’ll shoot you,” Anya says, really hoping that Jaha can hit a target. It would suck if he hit Anya instead.

She really, really doesn’t want to get shot.

So she zip ties Nia to one of her chairs— and really, she shouldn’t have wooden chairs with arm rests if she didn’t want to be tied to one. Arm, arm, foot, foot. Around the chest.

“Are you serious,” Nia says, when Anya adds an extra one to her elbow.

“Here’s the deal.” Anya has never been this close in Nia’s space before. The woman’s breath smells like lemons. “You tell us exactly where to go. If something happens to us, he shoots you.”

“Commander’s dead and you’re finally off your leash?” Nia’s trying to goad her, maybe trying to stall her, which means they need to hurry. Means that she thinks she has backup.

And Anya doesn’t think about Lexa covered in blood. Doesn’t think about the panicked voices over the radio.

Doesn’t think about the second she’d thought Lexa was dead and tried to plan the next three steps. Tried to decide if she was going to stay.

(It was a moment of weakness. It won’t happen again.)

(But there is no Coalition without Lexa. And Anya doesn’t think she can stay and watch it all fall apart.)

(Sometimes she remembers Lexa as she had first met her. Eight years old and angry.)

She turns to look at Jaha. His hands aren’t shaking on the gun, and that’s something. If he shoots Nia, even non-fatally, that’s the end of his life as he knows it. He must know that. Must know what
it’s going to look like to anyone who arrives. But he just meets Anya’s eyes and nods.

“Check in every minute or so,” she says.

He nods again.

Stares fixedly at Nia.

Good, then.


The Frost house is eerily shiny, and eerily quiet.

She tranqs the next guard they see, but he hardly seems to register anything, whether conscious or not. So Lexa and Griffin are still making ALIE lag.

That has to be a good thing.

“Shut up,” Jaha says suddenly. Anya looks at Wire, who shrugs.

“Don’t talk to her,” Anya warns him, because the last thing they need is him having some crisis right now. They’re still making their way down one of the lower halls, and she’s trying to ignore the pain in her leg.

“You think I don’t want to hurt you?” Jaha asks. “You made my father try and kill himself. Your man kidnapped and tortured my friend. Not for information— just drew on her face with a soldering iron for fun. So yes, I would shoot you. I would kill you, and I’d go to jail for it, knowing I made the world a little bit better. So shut the fuck up.”

“Atta boy, Bishop,” Wire mutters.

He shouldn’t reveal so much of himself to the enemy, but it’s too late to stop him. And there’s something admirable, Anya supposes, about someone who is upfront with their values and loyalty. Jaha is new to this game they’re playing with each others’ lives, but he’s adapted to it well enough.

She hopes he survives this.

She and Wire are almost at the basement stairs when a figure steps out from one of the many parlors. His hands are above his head, and it’s the only reason Anya doesn’t shoot.

“Hey,” Roan says.

Indra had once said that Roan’s skull looked like it was desperately trying to escape from the confines of his face, and it’s a mental image that Anya has never been able to forget. It’s also part of why she has a hard time looking Roan in said face without wanting to laugh. Or encourage him to eat and moisturize. Years of training keep her lips from twitching, but when she says “hello, Roan,” and assumes that Jasper relays the message— well, she knows Indra knows what she’s thinking.

“Motherfucker,” Wire says eloquently. “The fuck have you been?”
“Only shutting down the security feeds and leaving the doors unlocked for you,” Roan says. “You’re welcome for that.”

“Thanks.” Anya makes it as insincere as she can.

“I assume you’re holding my mother hostage?”

“Checking in,” Jaha says helpfully, and Anya nods.

“Cool,” Roan says. “So what’s the plan?”

Wire turns to Anya, shrugging a bit. “Technically I don’t think he quadruple crossed us.” Lexa would know better, now that she’s connected to ALIE, but they can’t ask her without tipping ALIE off. They could tranq him now, but if he did unlock the doors, then maybe he’s on their side.

And even with her leg, Anya thinks she could take him in a fight.

Probably.

She could shoot him, anyway.

“Come along, then,” she says.

Chapter End Notes

I have a lot of excuses for this taking so long. I've written out the ending part here so many times in my head, sometimes I forget that I haven't actually written it. Hopefully part two won't be quite so slow.

Also, does anyone else have the same problem with Zach Mcgowan's face that I do?? It's super skeletal. It works for the parts he plays (yes I watched all of Black Sails the week before my thesis was due, sue me,) but it's a little unsettling when he's out of character. (No offense, Zach, you're great at what you do.)
Clarke is still screaming, and Lexa isn’t sure if she should stop her or not. It seems to be doing a good job of keeping ALIE from controlling her, and it means Lexa can’t think, which means ALIE can’t have her thoughts, but it means she can’t think. So she readies her knives, staring at the street, waiting for the next threat—

The street—

There’s something wrong with the street.

It’s not the people, who are backing slowly away from her, confusion writ on previously expressionless faces. It’s the road itself: where previously there had been normal asphalt, it’s now a flat black. The pebbled cement under her feet has gone blank, too, but her shoes still look normal. And the building behind her— bricks are now a flat red.

Okay.

This could be good.

Or it could be bad. ALIE saving processing power for some as-yet unknown attack.

Clarke is still screaming.

Keeping one eye on the people around them— people whose names are dropping into her head, erratically, like they’re long-lost acquaintances, their life stories at the tip of her tongue— Lexa eases back a couple steps and puts one hand on a wall behind her.

It blinks black for just a moment before turning to flat slate. No texture, no detail.

She’s a bug.

She’s a lag.

She’s literally causing technological malfunctions with nothing more than proximity and she’s going to have to tell Anya about this when she gets back because Anya has always said that’s Lexa’s secret superpower.
But first.

The people aren’t losing any detail yet, and even though they seem to be at a standstill (That’s Alice, and that’s Sam, and that’s Daniel, and that one’s Mindy and there’s Cassidy and Rebekah-with-a-K and Nate and Tim, and she doesn’t want to know this nor them to know her) and she can see fragments of what they see, when they look at her, and Clarke—

Clarke, who hasn’t even paused for breath, because her scream is entirely in her mind.

The scream might be the only thing saving her, but if Lexa’s theory is right, then they have to risk it, for the sake of everyone outside. Lexa can’t feel the bed under her anymore, can’t hear Monty’s voice. The City of Light is the only thing real to her right now, and she can only hope that when they die here they’ll wake up in reality.

She hadn’t liked Inception.

“Clarke!” She shouts, and Clarke stops screaming.

“Lexa?” and she sounds so hesitant, so scared. “Lexa, no—”

“Hey.” Lexa grips Clarke’s shoulder, pulling her to her feet as best she can. “We need to run. Cover as much of the City as we can. Slow it down.”

Clarke looks at the flat ground underneath their feet and catches on. “Abe Atom Billy,” she mutters, a new mantra to cover the scream. “Daniel Ellie Maya—” she nods at Lexa, and then they run, Clarke chanting names with every step.

The techs in front of the computers are as slow to respond as the rest of ALIE’s pod people, and Raven tranqs them before they’ve fully turned their heads. She hits them all on the first try, and it’s such a relief. She knows these guns, she knows the angles and the pressure but that’s nothing next to experience and she hasn’t had a lot of experience, these last few years.

But she can’t falter in front of Anya. And especially not Roan.

The room itself is small, with just two workstations. This can’t be anywhere near their whole operation, but it’ll have to do.

“Take the chair,” Anya says, as Roan drags the now unconscious programmer out of it.

Doing so will mean having both of them at her back.

But it’s not like she could take them in a fight, anyway.

Raven takes a deep breath, and then sits.

The program open on the computer doesn’t look like much, until she gets to the subfolders. Thousands of names appear then, tagged to folders: she clicks one open, conscious of the others’ breaths on the back of her neck. Inside is—
Is a life.

Summarized and tags in short bursts of code, tagged to the minute and the second. Data trees of relationships and memories: not emotions, Raven notes, not any of the if-than-else tangle of thoughts Monty had once tried to describe to her. Just neatly bracketed facts.

Anyà leans around the back of the monitor. “Plugging in the drives now, Python,” she says. “Let us know when you can see what we see.”

The name Raven had clicked was #ES3145[Sands, Emori], but of course they’re all number tags here. It wouldn’t make sense otherwise. But it also means she doesn’t know where to start looking for Clarke and Lexa.

This tiny basement room is bigger than her room in the Dropship building, but feels like it’s closing in on her.

Her leg hurts.

God, how her leg hurts.

“I’m online,” Monty says. “See if you can sort by date added.”

Raven does, and there, at the top: #CG1031[Griffin, Clarke]. Heart in her throat, she clicks—

[ERROR: FILE CORRUPTED]

“We have to assume that’s good.”

Maybe.

“That one,” Anya says, now back over her shoulder. She points a few names down, her finger blocking the screen. “Alexis Heda.” #AH3316[Heda, Alexis]. Raven clicks, wondering if she’s going to be killed in the future for what she sees—

{location: 214.5203.1
Time: 05282016 18.21.22.23
Observation: #CG1031 #CG1031 #CG1031 #CG1031 #CG1031 #CG1031}

And then the screen blinks with a new update— she’s moved, and all thoughts are still linking back to #CG1031. It has no language to code for emotion but it seems to be doing the best it can, repeating Clarke’s designation over and over and over again.

Raven would be embarrassed on Lexa’s behalf if the situation wasn’t quite so dire.
“Remember, I’ve blocked her off from thinking about… almost anyone else. She hasn’t forgotten them, she just won’t think of them without a prompt. So this is also just, all the emotions she’s feeling that she doesn’t know she’s feeling, coming out with one subject.”

It’s worth it to risk a glance at Anya and see the raised eyebrow.

Maybe Raven isn’t the only one with mocking plans in store.

And maybe it’s not too far off how Lexa normally thinks— but that’s not fair, she’s got a city to run and five different political dramas every day and apparently a child, so like, presumably her brain isn’t one hundred percent gay one hundred percent of the time.

Probably.

“Should I get her out of there?”

“We can’t,” Roan says. “If you’re telling the truth and they’re the only one slowing these people down.”

Raven picks the next name on the list— a #PD2382— and selects and deletes the data.

[PROVIDE ADMINISTRATOR PASSWORD TO CONTINUE]

“Shit.” One more, with feeling. “Shit. Python—”

“It’ll take me too long from here.”

Shit. Shit shit. She tries going back and deleting the framework, the code that makes up the buildings and world: again, it demands a password. And she doesn’t know what will happen to them, if she just deletes the world: safer to get them out first, and then delete all the information and all the backups and then maybe burn the hard drives and all the back up drives, just to be safe.

Her leg really, really hurts.

They’re running, and the ground is flattening under them, and then—

Darkness.

Lexa’s stomach drops as she takes another step forward, landing on nothing she can see— she is nothing, she is weightless, she can see her hand and Clarke’s hair and then—

And then the world blinks back into place. The ground is perfect. Everything is neatly textured. Everything is real. There’s even a breeze.

And hundreds of people are running towards them.
“Clarke,” she says.

“Yep.” Clarke nods a few times. “I see them.”

They’re coming from down the road behind them, led by people that had been still and confused just a few minutes ago. Seems like ALIE’s rebooted.

At least Clarke has stopped screaming.

They run.

And then there are people cutting them off and Lexa flings herself into them, knives out, and hoping that killing someone in the City keeps them down without killing their real self. Getting hit sure hurts, though.

They break through the line, red rover red rover, and into an industrial area— and why does the City have an industrial area, but it doesn’t matter because they’re running between factories where there’s nowhere to swerve, a straight shot for someone shooting at them. But no one shoots, they just follow, and maybe they don’t have guns here— Lexa had willed her knives into existence but she can’t seem to do the same for a gun—

They hit a fence.

“ALIE’s back online,” Monty says. “We’re still barricaded but they’re going at the doors again—”

“Trying to jump down the skylight,” Octavia reports. “It’s easy to shoot them as they come down but if they drop in a smoke bomb—”

“Or an actual bomb—”

Someone slams against the door to the control room.

“Bishop, report!” Anya points her guns at the door.

“I’m okay up here,” Wells says. “Locked the door but I can’t hold a gun on Frost and the door at the same time.”

“We have to get them out of the system.”

“No shit, Roan!” Raven’s leg hurts and she has no idea about how to enter a password— she’d start entering gibberish but who knows what it’ll do with the wrong one? If they hadn’t shot the IT then—

The IT guy.

Raven points at him. “Get me his name.”

And thank god Roan does it, squats and rifles through the man’s pockets while Raven switches
Monroe was really good at galaga as a kid. At least, she thought she was— she’d been the only one she knew who was playing galaga. And if she squints, this is kind of the same thing: they’re on the roof now, peering over the edge. If she sees flesh, she shoots. And she’s a damn good shot.

Sometimes they fall through the skylight. There’s three of them in a heap on the ground.

She’ll feel bad, maybe, when they wake up.

If they wake up.

Nobody’s talking about it, the chance that yanking them out of the City will just leave them brain dead. But she’ll leave that to Clarke’s mom, the actual brain scientist.

She’s just going to shoot.

One drops through the roof, and he’s got a gun— Monroe tranqs him but he’s still got his finger on the trigger and everyone dives for cover as bullets pepper the walls. One hits where Octavia had been a second ago, and Monroe wants to throw up—

But she’s fine, she’s fine, and the unconscious man joins the pile. He looks too old to bounce back from that fall.

“How’s it going in there?” Connor shouts in the direction of the bedroom. The comm doubles it, and everyone cringes away.

“Um,” Bellamy says. “We need Wire to get the password—”

“We’re working on it!” Raven shouts. Then— “No I was talking to— shut up. We’re going through his memories, trying to find it—”

Going through his memories, Christ on a cupcake. If ALIE gets in here, if she tells them take the chip or die, Monroe knows what she’s going to do. Her memories are hers, and they’re going to die with her— although the idea of being a pod zombie, terrorizing her mom and brother, is a little funny.

Not very funny.

She hasn’t spoken to them since Zeke left her holding the bag— literally— and her mother had encouraged it. (Oh, he’s older, he’ll be tried as an adult. Fuck you, mom, I ended up with a mad scientist.) But if ALIE got that then it would get her father, too, those memories she keeps precious by using his name. It would see her thoughts, the confusing tangle tying her to Harper and the rest of Sky Crew and she just—

She shoots.
This is what she’s good at.

A blink of a target, and her shots go where she wills them to, all angles and velocities that come to her easy as a mothertongue. Her father wouldn’t be proud— he hated guns— but she helps people and maybe he’d be okay with that.

Harper dashes across the room to where Monroe has set up on the toppled refrigerator. “I got four darts left and eventually one of them’s going to have body armor.”

She’s not wrong. Most of their powers are fucking useless in here, too: Octavia isn’t going to have the element of surprise, Connor doesn’t have a lot to light on fire, and all Miller can do is tell them how many are on the roof. (It’s five, right now. Blowing the window had better be worth it, Clarke.)

(If Clarke isn’t dead.)

“How the hell— get away from the front!” Miller yells, making a break for the kitchen— they all jump after him—

And that’s when a car drives through the front door.

It doesn’t get far— it knocks over the stove and couch they had blocking it, but it gets the front door open wide enough for two then three people to get inside—

Monroe shoots and Murphy lunges at them and a woman drops from the ceiling with no one shooting her down and they’re surrounded—

They need to guard the bedroom: they don’t have any chance of taking them down if they get to Monty. Harper’s had the same thought: they shove their way over to the door and Monroe has been punched, a lot of times, and it still fucking hurts even when she rolls with it: she takes out the guy’s kneecap and Harper drops her gun, empty, and picks up a golf club from the garage that they’d wedged under a door and starts swinging—

And Monroe loses track of the rest, she loses track of the room, she lands a kick on a man’s chest but all it does is shove him backwards a few feet, they have no sense of pain and she’s got four, now three, shots left, he collapses and it gives her a window to take out the person on top of Connor, now two—

One—

The password is three months back in Miles Berg’s memories, and Raven copies and it and hopes it’s not a trap set to blow, and her leg hurts: there is the sound of gunfire from the hall, they’re trying to shoot the door in, and—

She selects all the names, and types in the command Monty is reciting to her.

It asks for the password. She pastes it in.

The computer freezes.
Clarke reaches out, and Lexa takes her hand.

The fence goes all the way to the ceiling. Trapped. Firewall.

“Can you fly?” Lexa asks, without letting go.

Clarke shrugs. “There’s nowhere to go.” Pause. “I’m not letting you fight them on your own.”

She could. She could argue that Clarke has to save herself for as long as possible in case Monty and… Monty and… Monty and the rest of them can shut this all down—

“It’s okay,” Clarke says. “I’m really glad I got to see you again. I didn’t think I would.”

And Lexa thinks, I love you, but it’s not the time or place to say it, because there’s a lot missing around her right now, so she squeezes Clarke’s hand again and lets it drop.

They line advances.

They brace themselves.

The man hitting her falters for a second, and Monroe tosses him to the ground. His eyes are going wide— and did they do it—

But Murphy screams, blood gushing from his leg, and no—

“Harper,” Monroe says—

Her leg hurts like it hasn’t hurt in years and Raven shakes the mouse until it lets her open the trash folder, in case ALIE gets any bright ideas, setting it to automatically delete—

[EVICTING RESIDENTS, 2% COMPLETED]

“

They’re glitching!” Connor shouts. “Shit! Sort of! Sort of glitching!”
“Not glitching enough!” is Octavia’s report, followed by a weird sort of battle cry. Raven wishes she had Octavia’s pluck.

“We’re leaving them alone,” Roan realizes. Horror is uncharacteristic on his face. “If they’re in groups, ALIE’s going to know who’s woken up, she could have the others just kill them—”

They should have found a way to do it by distance, a bubble emanating from where Raven sits, but her leg hurts and there isn’t— wasn’t— isn’t— time.

“We have to keep them away from the computer.” Anya’s jammed the chairs under the door handle, but it’s going to do less good than the gun she has trained on it. “No matter what.”

[EVICTING RESIDENTS: 5% COMPLETED]

The woman leading the charge disappears.

Lexa starts to smile.

[20% COMPLETED]

One second she’s on her feet and the next she’s on the floor and she doesn’t know what happened between points A and B but the floor is nice, really, it’s a decent carpet, covered in debris and bloodstains, that’s a shame, and Monroe blinks a few times and then there’s a hand reaching for her and she takes it, lets Harper yank her back into war.

(Harper is the most beautiful thing she’s ever seen, and she’ll take that thought to her grave.)

[33% COMPLETED]
It hurts, and Clarke holds onto that. It hurts and the City of Light isn’t supposed to hurt. The pain will keep her safe, because there’s a cut on her arm and a ringing in her head and she focuses on them when things get fuzzy, when she lets go of the back of her mind and can feel herself being sapped away. My father was Jake Griffin, she thinks, and he’s dead, and ALIE will not take him away from her. Clarke can tear herself open and there’s her father and Finn and Maya and Abe, Atom, Billy, Daniel, and there’s Jasper immobile on the couch and there’s Lexa, Lexa hurts too, and she doesn’t know why—

It hurts, and she lets it, and she punches, and she kicks, and she hurts, but they will not get her, they will not—

[48% COMPLETED]

A man gets his head through the door. He meets Anya’s fist, and falls back into his buddies. Roan slams the door again.

“Nice punch,” he says.

[55%]

The man who was punching Murphy stops, turns, and punches another guy instead. “My son,” he manages. He is covered in blood—head wound, they bleed, Clarke could fix him if Clarke’s still alive. “You know my son, where is he—”

Monroe ducks a punch, and misses the rest of the exchange.

She understands his horror, though.

She’s woken up as someone else’s puppet. She hadn’t come down easy either.
The woman she’s tackling disappears, and Lexa lands on the cement.

She looks around for Clarke, but Clarke’s gone.

One of the ALIEs makes a dive for the door. It’s the wrong door, they’re winning, that’s what Monty is saying over the comms, and even though a good half of the City seems to be down it doesn’t feel like they’re winning so Monroe throws herself on top of him. He rolls, and gets an elbow in her neck, and then he freezes, and she shoves him.

He starts howling as he rolls, grabbing his arm.

Clarke goes from the City to the warehouse floor and she’s not in time to block a blow to her face.

“I was just fighting you,” she says to the man. “How are you in both places at once? I don’t think I was.”

She breaks his arm.

He screams.
“Are you okay?” Wells is saying, over and over. “Are you okay? Wire? Anya? Anyone?”

“We’re here,” Raven manages. The attacks on the door have quieted. “You?”

“I guess Nia wasn’t important to the program, in the end.”

[99%]

The next time Lexa falls, she lands on Gustus’s bed, upright. Muscles stiff—she hasn’t used them since she healed. She had been sure her elbow was dislocated, but there’s nothing to show for it now—and then it all hits her, at once—*Indra* and *Anya* and *oh god*, “Aden—”

“They’re fine,” and that’s *Jasper*—

“Clarke—”

But nobody knows because they have no way to reach her—

[EVICTIONS COMPLETE]

“My son,” the man is saying. He’s the only one not screaming in pain from injuries he couldn’t feel just seconds ago. “My son, Wells, where is he?”

There’s a woman—she can’t stand, but she shoots Ontari with Clarke’s dropped tranq gun.

Ontari falls.
Clarke joins the rest of them on the ground and lets the ceiling spin.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up on the end here, my dudes. Thanks to all of you who've stuck around since its rage-infused beginning, and to everyone who joined up in the middle, and those of you who are reading this months later. All of you are great, and however long it's been, it's still fun to hear from you. I've added an extra chapter to the count because the next one didn't really fit in this one.
Dusk

Chapter Summary

(Is this what a win looks like?)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It should be night.

That’s all Clarke can think as she sits in the doorway to the warehouse: there isn’t a bone in her body that doesn’t ache right now, her superhero landing completely trashed the bottoms of the boots Raven made her, and it should be night out. Enough has changed.

But it’s not—the harsh, golden light of evening is creating long, dark shadows. The clouds are shot through with pink.

A new world.

Well. The old world, back again. Restored?

Maybe.

“Does anyone have a phone?” she manages, when she’s caught all her stray thoughts together. It’s not a good group to ask: she’s caused them all significant amounts of pain, and they’re only now feeling it: there’s broken legs, and then there’s broken legs you’ve been fighting on, and in another time, in another place, she’d be hovering over the injured, helping them set bones and stop the bleeding—but god, she didn’t injure anyone fatally and she feels like she’s done enough.

(It’s never enough. She’ll get up in a minute.)

She could use Ontari’s phone, maybe, but she doesn’t want her prints on it, doesn’t want there to be a case that she tampered with it. She’s already tampered in just about everything.

“Here.” The woman who shot Ontari limps over to her. Her phone screen is shattered, but it’s still on. “I bet 911 is overloaded.”

Clarke looks back. The people in the warehouse are all in dark shadow, but she is pretty sure she gave at least one a concussion. “I bet they are.” Some people will probably have weeks-old injuries, infected or stewing the whole time, that they’re only just noticing.

She dials.

“9-1-1, Where is your emergency?”

“The Frosttech building in Azgeda Park. Um, thirteenth street. We have… maybe a couple dozen injured?” she looks at the woman.

“Thirty one,” she says.
“Thirty one injured. Um, some broken bones, I think a concussion—a few were hit with tranquilizers, may have hit something falling down.” Jesus, she doesn’t want to deal with this. The responder tells her someone’s on their way, and she should get up but she thinks she’s sprained at least two limbs and eventually she hangs up, because these guys are going to be fine, probably. Some of them are fine already, barely injured, just held back by fear or shame or concern for their fellow injured man. And she has Ontari to deal with. But she’s got at least twenty minutes before Ontari wakes back up.

And.

She dials Raven back at the tower.

“Hello?”

That’s not Raven. “Jasper? What?”

“Clarke!” he— shouts, and that can’t be good for his chest. “Clarke, thank holy God, guys, it’s Clarke!” There’s some noise she can’t parse, and then— “Everyone says hi,” Jasper concludes, a little lamely.

“Is everyone okay? Where’s—” she glances at the woman next to her. “Wire?”

“Everyone’s fine. Well, everyone’s going to be fine. Raven, Anya and Wells went and broke into Nia Frost’s house and saved us all, you know, after you and Lexa and Monty and Abby saved us all, and after the rest of the Crew saved the rest of them, so that’s where they are.”

He’d said everyone, and that’s got to include her mom and Lexa, but fuck it, the sun is in her eyes and she’s going to ask anyway. “Lexa?” She doesn’t know what they did to her, to get her into the City, and for all Clarke knows she could have gotten hurt there afterward: Clarke doesn’t think her injuries from the City of Light made it back to reality, but she’s so bruised already that it’s hard to tell.

“Lexa, are you okay?” Jasper asks, and he’s obviously just humorizing her because Lexa’s always going to say yes. “They put a modified chip in her, sort of, that let Monty control her brain, they’re going to take it out.”

Let Monty control her—

“What?”

“Your mom says it’s all fine now.” Also probably a lie, but the ambulances are going to get her soon and Clarke isn’t going to believe anything they say until she can see it for herself anyway.

“Can you get me Marcus Kane’s number?” she asks.

The woman with the phone, who introduces herself as Emori, helps Clarke tie Ontari up with some wires. It’s not super secure, but they don’t have anything else, they’re out of darts, and hopefully she won’t wake up until someone shows up with handcuffs.

If she does wake up, Clarke would be happy to knock her out.
Of course, then Ontari might suffer brain damage that might limit the legal system’s ability to do its job, but the legal system hasn’t been doing its fucking job in this city for years, so what the hell else would be new. It would make Clarke feel better.

Except it hurts to move, and the idea of punching anyone makes her hand ache. So maybe not.

The injured people keep staring at her.

She supposes its fair. She’s the one that got them injured in the first place.

And it’s better than the crying, which some of them are doing, or the hyperventilating, which others are doing, and she feels for them, she really does, but she can’t help aside from telling one guy to lift his arm and another not to move his. 911 will be here soon. She retreats to the sidewalk, back to the wall, hauling Ontari after her.

Ontari is fucking heavy.

Emori helps, some. They get her in a heap next to them while they wait.

The sun dips below the surrounding buildings.

“Thanks,” she says.

“Of course.” Emori sits down as well, wrapping her arms around her knees. Clarke thinks she should maybe apologize for the bruise forming on Emori’s face, or the awkward way she walks, but she can’t bring herself to feel bad about it right now. Later— later she’ll care. Later it’ll eat her alive, but she did what she had to. “God, this is weird,” Emori says.

“What?”

A shrug. “I haven’t been alone in my head for weeks.” She flexes her fingers. The ring and pinky finger on her left hand are fused together, and Clarke wonders if that was the pain that got her into the City in the first place. She doesn’t ask. “And now it’s just… me.”

“Sorry,” Clarke says, but she isn’t.

“Don’t be. It was—” Emori stops. “Shit.”

“What?”

She shakes her head, pressing her fingers on either side of her nose. “I just remembered that my brother is dead.”

There’s nothing Clarke can say to make her feel better about that. “You forget that, in there?”

“I think… I don’t know. It’s like I forgot I had ever had a brother. Everything was just… happy. Not emotionally happy, but calm. Content. No one could be sad— it wasn’t programmed to handle emotions. I was still me, most of the time, when ALIE didn’t want something from me— but I also knew everything others were seeing, like I saw it on TV. I probably know hundreds of strangers now. I’m going to see them on the street and I’ll have seen them before through someone else’s eyes. Or maybe their own. And they’ll know me, too.”

Oh, god.

“Did you get anything from me?” she’d tried, she’d tried so hard, but—
“You were static,” Emori says. “And screaming.”

Yes. She had done that. Thousands of people are going to remember her as the screaming girl, but that can’t be helped, because her secrets are nothing compared to, “Lexa?” It’s going to break her, if all her secrets are out there, if she can’t protect herself and Aden—

She couldn’t ask Jasper about Aden, but she hopes to god he’s okay.

“All we got from L— the Commander— was you.”

That’s good, it means that Monty found some way of protecting her in there, but “What do you mean, me?”

“You know.” Emori shrugged. “How she feels about you. I think— I realized when I woke up that the reason there couldn’t be pain in the City must have been because it was all… communal, you know? If one person stubbed their toe and we all felt it, it would have been hard to manage. It’s why we were all in the same emotional place— so we could share factual information, without… cross-contaminating. So when the Commander showed up, we all felt what she felt.”

*What does she feel?* Clarke doesn’t ask, because this isn’t middle school and Emori is a stranger. A stranger who partially shared Lexa’s head, and shot Ontari, but still a stranger.

“But then you attacked her.”

“We didn’t do anything, for a bit. Like we were glitching. But then someone fixed the bug. So we all— we attacked you, because that’s what we were programmed to do, but we also sort of loved you as well, for a few minutes there.”

*Please stop talking,* Clarke thinks, and then, *what?*

(Lexa loves her?)

“What?” she manages.

“It’s gone now,” Emori says, still stuck in her own bubble. It makes sense, if she’s had calm, happy people to chat with for months. “It’s like I read a book, or watched a movie— you know, when you fall in love with the love interest along with the main character? And then you finish it and then it’s gone.”

“I’m sorry,” Clarke splutters. “You all what?”

“Loved you.” Like it’s obvious.

(Lexa loves her?)

(That’s definitely giddiness, that sort of bubble going through her chest right now. Get a grip, Clarke.)

(Lexa loves her?)

“Everyone?” she asks. “Because my friend’s dad was in there and I’m not comfortable— what all did you get—” But, “I’m sorry, you’ve just been through something real traumatic.”

“So have we all. And don’t worry about your friend’s dad. If we’re all reacting the same way, it’s like, he just read your girlfriend’s diary, or something.”
“She’s not—” Clarke doesn’t know if she was about to say Lexa’s not her girlfriend (it sounds childish, after all of this, and her information about Lexa’s feelings is all second-hand, or third-hand, or something,) or that Lexa would never keep a diary due to security issues, but that’s when the ambulances pull up. There’s only three of them, and they’re not going to be able to fit everybody in there, but she’s happy to lurk in the corner and let them do their thing.

The EMTs are understaffed. There should be more of them on a call like this. But if the Arkadia hospital was anything to go by, a lot of EMTs were ALIE. They’re all probably disoriented, too. Or realizing they haven’t eaten or slept in days.

God, this is going to be a giant fucking mess to deal with.

“They’re in there,” Clarke shouts, pointing at the door. One of the EMTs stops next to them.

“Clarke?”

Does Clarke know her, or is it someone who learned her name off the internet? She forces herself to her feet either way. “Um?”

“Byrne,” the woman says. “We overlapped at Arkadia.”

Clarke has no memory of her, but she smiles anyway.

“Do you two need help as well? What about her?” Byrne nods to Ontari.

“I’m fine.” Clarke’s not fine, but she’ll deal with it, and there’s no way she’s going to a hospital. For one thing, the hospital she used to work at probably stopped paying for her insurance when she disappeared. “The police are coming for this one.”

“Right.” Byrne looks at Emori, who waves her off, and then jogs inside to help the others.

Clarke sits back down, poking Ontari with her toe. “I’m probably breaking about ten due process laws.” Can’t be helped. Ontari, though—from Clarke’s understanding, she is what Nia made her, so maybe with a lot of therapy, she could be helped.

And if she can’t…

Clarke can’t think about what will happen if all the crimes Lexa and Sky Crew committed mean that Nia and Ontari and Emerson don’t get life in prison.

She might have to kill them.

It’s not an entirely unpleasant thought.

The sun is gone, now, leaving them under a thick blanket of dusk. In another time, some of Sky Crew would be headed out to lurk in the streets. In another time, Abby would be calling Clarke in for dinner. In another life—

The putt-putt of a motorcycle engine cuts off that thought, and Murphy pulls up behind the ambulances. And Clarke will blame the fact that he’s the first one she’s seen alive for how she forces herself onto her feet and wraps her arms around him.

“Hey, Princess.” He sort of awkwardly pats her on the back, but still sounds pleased. “Never thought I’d live to see the day you were glad to see me.”

“You always live to see the day, you goddamn cockroach.” But she’s not able to sound as cold as
she wants to, either.

It *is* good to see him, goddammit.

But of the people she’d think would come running to see her, he doesn’t make the top five. “Where’s everyone else?”

“Injured, mostly.” He nods to Emori, spits next to Ontari, and then pulls out a new magazine for the dart gun. “Thought you might need these for her. Homer wanted to come but— *hum*, Shadow got her leg fucked up, and he didn’t want to leave her. He was all—” he makes an exaggerated face of an ethical dilemma. Clarke doesn’t laugh.

“Is she okay?”

“Yeah, she’ll be fine. They’re laying low for a little bit, because there’s sort of a mob scene over there, what with all the injured people. And then your girl went to meet the others at the police station. Hopefully with some lawyers. Um, your doc went with her. She wanted to come here, but she doesn’t know how to ride a motorcycle and I didn’t want her getting all cozy with me.” And maybe he knew that having Abby here would be overwhelming, but if he did it out of interest for Clarke, he doesn’t say, and she doesn’t bring it up.

It’s getting easier to forgive him as her face heals.

“Don’t ever call her ‘my girl’ again,” Clarke says, and Murphy just grins. It’s not quite his deranged battle grin, but it’s close enough that Clarke chooses to look elsewhere. “This is Emori,” is what she settles on. “She tried to turn me into a zombie, but then she shot Ontari.”

“Hi,” Emori says, offering a hand. She’s still sitting, but Murphy shakes it anyway.

“I’m John.”

Clarke squints at him, and he sighs. “That’s the other thing. The news is starting to crawl out, and there are photos fucking everywhere. Some of us are going to need hospitals, and since the City of Light people know who was chipped and who wasn’t, we’re not going to be able to claim we were on the other side of this fight. The age of the secret identity is pretty well shot.”

“Welcome to the club.” Half a dozen headlines come to mind, and none of them are flattering. “I’ll make up some name tags. Where the fuck is Kane?”

The ambulances are clearing away now, but sure enough there’s more people loitering on the end of the block. Whether they’re here for Clarke or the flashing lights it’s hard to say, but there were thousands of people in the City of Light that must know where she is. It’s enough to make her want to float out of here, but they have to wait.

“Traffic’s a bitch. I was weaving through a parking lot.”

Christ.

Ontari is starting to twitch. Clarke slips a dart out of the magazine and jams it into the woman’s arm with no degree of finess, just in case.

She really hopes that someone has safely taken Nia into custody.

“Any word on the llama?”
“Yo, Gog, any word on our dear friend Carl?” Murphy tilts his head for a second. “Nope.”

Cool. That’s excellent. He’s another one Clarke won’t mind killing, if it comes down to it. She should probably stop being so revenge-driven. She already won.

Did they win?

(Is this what a win looks like? Painful and cold and with so many questions?)

A police car pulls up before she can ruminate on that, and Kane gets out. She’s glad to see him, too. Though not enough to give him a hug.

“Clarke,” and that’s weird, her name coming from him. “Glad you’re okay.”

She honestly hadn’t thought he cared. “Thanks.” Standing again is fucking exhausting. “So, everyone who was chipped can confirm that this woman was…” she wasn’t responsible for it, precisely. “Part of management?”

Emori raises a hand. “Was chipped, can confirm, will give testimony—”

“Okay,” Kane cuts her off. “We can take her to the Azgeda Park station with the other—”

“You took Nia Frost to a police station in Azgeda Park?” Clarke asks, alarmed. “She owns all those cops, even the ones that aren’t chipped.”

He raises an eyebrow at her. “And Lexa owns all the others.” Okay. That’s… fair. “But we’ve got some big government guys come in, so it’s all out of my hands, anyway.” Big government? “We can talk about it in the car.” Frown. “Are you all going? Because there’s only one extra seat up front.”

“I have the bike,” Murphy says, just as Clarke turns to Emori saying “I’m sure you have somewhere to—” and Emori says “We’re all going.”

“You don’t—”

“Most people in the City can tell them what I can, but who knows who’ll be there.” Emori shrugs. “I want to get the motherfuckers locked up, and I don’t have anyone waiting for me.”

“I’m not letting Ontari out of my sight,” Clarke says. Kane sighs.

“I’ll give you a ride,” Murphy tells Emori.

Clarke tries to give him her best stern look, but Emori’s been through a lot of shit lately and can probably take care of herself against Murphy’s brand of asshole. Instead she just lets Kane handcuff Ontari and deposit her in the back of the car, because Kane hasn’t been in a fight today and he seems like a big strong man who can manage these things. Or that’s what she tries to imply by not helping.

She does duck back into the warehouse to snag her gun, and reload it with the ammo Murphy brought. The building is dark and empty, now. The fans are still running, and some of the servers are still blinking, but a lot of them are smashed.

It’s FrostTech, though, so she doesn’t really care if their service slows down.

“Is drugging her going to mess things up, legally?” she asks when she climbs into the shotgun seat of Kane’s car. She’s never actually ridden in the front of a police car before, and maybe later she’ll
laugh about it.

“Everything we’ve ever done in this damn city is illegal.” Kane sounds like he’s aged twenty years this week. *Same here, buddy.* Clarke doesn’t know if she’s really slept since Lexa went to Washington. Since they met with Roan, even. Since Charlotte died. Since her father died. “That’s a problem for the next several years worth of lawyers.”

Several years.

“It’s never going to end, is it?” she lets her head drop against the window, outside which people are gathering in the streets. Pointing to the car, pointing to each other, pointing at Murphy behind them, cameras up, cameras pointed at the warehouse. It’s probably a complete madhouse back where the big fight was.

“This part’s ended,” Kane says carefully. “But yes, we’re going to be feeling this one for a long time.” Pause. “Smile, you’re probably going to go from Polis-famous to world-famous.”

Clarke doesn’t smile.

“Is it true that they’ve arrested—”

“—Officer, who is that?—”

“Clarke! Clarke!”

“Did you hurt this woman? Why is she unconscious?”

“Clarke, look over here!”

“Don’t look,” Kane says, as though Clarke is an idiot. There’s only about six of them now—local paper, local news, an ABC sub-channel, and a guy who can’t be more than twenty who could be Reddit come to life—and she could probably fight them all, even in her current state.

She keeps her eyes straight ahead at the glass doors of the station.

More officers meet them, and get Ontari out of the car, and there’s talks of booking and identification and legalities and counsel but Clarke stops listening, because she’s stepped inside and there in conference with a group of people in suits is her mom, and Indra, and Anya, and Wells and Raven and—

Lexa turns, and she looks whole. Whole and alive and Clarke had seen her healing, but she’d also seen her fall in the City of Light and everything still hurts but she elbows people out of the way anyway, crossing the room, and Lexa hurries to meet her—

And then she’s caught Clarke in a hug, and the crowd of people is hopefully blocking them from the cameras at the window, but if they aren’t Clarke can’t give a fuck because Lexa is here and alive and Clarke hides her face in her neck.

“I didn’t think I’d ever see you again,” she says. Lexa just holds her tighter.

And they’re surrounded by people but everything’s out there, they’re never going to have privacy
again, and there’s no reason for Clarke not to kiss her, and every reason for it, since she never thought she’d do it again—so she does, and Lexa leans into her, one hand in Clarke’s tangled hair and she holds on, and she holds on, and she holds on.

Chapter End Notes

One more!
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Warning for sexism and some homophobia from Emerson’s POV.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Carl Emerson, formerly of Mount Weather security detail, pulls into the no-name motel in the no-name town and gets out of his no-name car. It’s hot here, and that’s as far as he’s gotten on location: the sun is beating down on dark cement, and he can feel it through the soles of his shoes.

He’s running low on cash, but there’s nothing to be done about that right now: he’d gotten a look inside the till when he checked in, and this place isn’t even worth robbing.

Carl thinks of easy access to bank accounts with the longing that others might save for a lost love or a forest hit by developers. But he’s not going to make a withdrawal and risk the feds coming after him, not a fucking chance: Nia is ears deep in the mess, according to the news, and he doesn’t want anything to do with it.

The delinquents had ruined his life not once, but twice, and he’s not going to let them take what’s left.

He’ll go to Mexico. Sneak in if he has to. It’ll be a nice life, he’ll get used to hot weather, make some money and— Carl freezes, one foot in the door.

Clarke Griffin is sitting on his bed. Like she’s been there for hours— legs shoulder width apart, hands clasped together, leaning forward, head tilted a bit, as if she’s about to give him a fucking lecture. He notices with some satisfaction that the harsh sunlight through the window casts her scars into dramatic relief: she took everything from him, but she won’t be able to forget.

“Come inside,” she says. “Close the door.”

It hadn’t occurred to him not to: there’s no space outside for her Shadow to hide, and she’s probably armed, but so is he. One twitch of his wrist and—

“Take out your gun and you’re going to have at least three new problems.”

Killing the Media’s Favorite Controversy would bring attention, there’s no question about that. Then he’d get hauled into the mess he was trying to get out of, but if she’s here to bring him in, then Carl is going to have to decline. He closes the door anyways, stepping inside and moving so that the sun shines into her face and not on his. She just tilts her head a little more. Doesn’t even blink.

Bitch.

It’s a tiny motel room— patterned wallpaper, patterned carpet, patterned bedspreads creating a clash contrived to disguise stains. If the bathroom is as tiny and shitty as the room then it’s unlikely that she has an army waiting to burst out of there.

“How’d you find me?” he asks, because if she hasn’t shown her guns then she still thinks she has
the better hand, and he doesn’t want to give her the chance to play it. “Thought you’d be shacked up in a love nest with your girlfriend.” He still doesn’t know why they all follow her, when others in the group were stronger. Doesn’t know what it is about her that sucked Collins and Blake into her orbit, although that drama had been fun to watch from a distance. Now she’s suckered in another. It’s the same old pathetic story.

“Monty. You might know him—you tortured him a few times. And then your friends gave him some kooky internet powers. All we had to do is guess where you’d stop, and something about this motel just screamed coward, you know?”

She probably also paid off the fucking receptionist to give him the right room, or else this little drama wouldn’t have gone down how she wanted it to. But he bristles anyway, at her mention of Cage and Lorelei—

“You set my friends,” and they were his family, they were his opportunity—“on fire. How’s that story playing in your little fanclub?”

Griffin tilts her head even more. “Was that me? Was it just a mistake, when we were fleeing from cruel and inhumane treatment? It was such a busy night, sir, I can’t hardly remember, I was so afraid for my life, you see.”

Bitch.

“But now by happenstance I have run into the man who decided to draw on my face with a soldering iron, for no other reason than his own amusement. Surely no one will forgive me a bit of closure.”

The press will probably eat it up, too, with her wide eyes and blonde hair. If she’d been smart about it, she wouldn’t have tainted that with the whole lesbian thing.

“I wouldn’t be worried about you,” he says. “I’d worry about your pal Connor, who shoots fire from his fingers. Big angry black kid, burning people alive—” he’s struck a nerve there. Her eyes tighten. “Or Miller, the man who can see through walls and women’s clothing.” And he’s lost the nerve, because she smirks a bit. But whatever inside joke she thinks she’s playing out, he’s not going to go along with it. “Or your power hungry manipulative Don.”

She blinks and wrinkles her nose. It’s enough of a distraction that Carl’s able to get his gun out from his pocket and point it at her head, but she seems more perturbed by his words than his weapon. “My what now?”

“Don. Like in the mafia?”

Frown. “Oh. Put the gun away, you’re embarrassing yourself.”

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he asks again, not putting the gun away in the hopes that it will make his point for him. He can’t shoot her, because her little Crew probably knows who she’s going to meet, and he doesn’t need a murder investigation on his tail, but it’s a tempting thought. “You ruined my life, now you want to rub it in?”

“I ruined your—” she gapes for a second, like a fucking idiot, and then shakes her head. Doesn’t even want to deny it. Good.

“Then I tried to rebuild it, get back some respect, some authority, and you go and fuck that up too because you can’t keep your fucking nose out of my life, can you?” ALIE was his way back into the military, his way of sticking it to them for his discharge. He wasn’t going to be Emerson from
that horrific prison—as though those kids hadn’t done enough to earn their way in there, fuck those people feeling so sorry for them like their circumstances weren’t their own damn fault—he was going to be Emerson who was dealt a shitty blow through circumstances outside his control and came back swinging. He was going to be Emerson who brought Lorelei and Cage’s legacy out from the shadows. Who made it into something greater than even they had imagined.

“That’s certainly one way to look at it,” Griffin says, as though he’d expressed an outlandish theory about some TV show and not his fucking life. “Here’s another. You tortured and killed my friends and you don’t get to walk away from that.” Her hand moves, and he doesn’t even have a chance to take the safety off before she's holding a gun as well. “Sit down, Carl.” She indicates the other bed with a tilt of her head. Maneuvering him into position. He can shoot her, but then if she shoots him back she’ll be defending herself, and he’ll be dragged into court anyway. And his life will be complete.

So he sits down where he thinks he’s out of arm’s reach, but then her hand is flashing out and twisting his wrist and his fingers spread on instinct and he’s facing down both her gun and his own.

“Fucking bitch.”

“Yes, insult the woman with both guns. Good plan.” Griffin’s eyes are hard. “I have a question for you.”

What the fuck is she fucking playing?

“Did you kill Charlotte?”

It’s not what he expected, and he tries not to give anything away.

“I wondered, when I heard you had been around. You would have recognized her, of course. You’re clearly fine with kidnapping and mutilation, but would you kill a twelve year old?” He doesn’t answer. “Or it could have been an attempt to get information gone horribly wrong.” He stays silent. Just glares at her as best he can, because if she thinks she can intimidate him into any sort of confession, she’s wrong.

“If Murphy was here, he’d torture you into talking,” she says. It’s not the light banter of before. “He’s got all those weeks of pent up rage, and you know how he gets.” Fucking sociopath is what he is. “But he decided instead to stay in Polis. I’d torture you myself, but you were right about the media. Anything I do reflects on the Crew.”

If she’s not here to torture him or kill him then what the fuck does she want? He could be eating and wasting his miserable life away.

“I wanted to tattoo something on your face. It seemed only fair.” He should have cut her tongue out when he had the chance. “I thought, big X or bullseye on your forehead. But Bellamy says, then he could put on a hat. So maybe your cheeks, but Murphy says, then you could grow a beard. So I was going to do both, but my friend wouldn’t lend me his tattoo machine, and I don’t have the patience for a stick and poke. So here’s what I’m going to do instead.” She leans forward. Carl tries not to lean back.

“You’re going to do what?” he asks, when it’s clear that’s what she’s waiting for. That last humiliation.

“Nothing.”
“What?”

“Nothing.” She resumes her previous pose, guns still trained on him. “I’m not going to serve you a court summons, or disfigure you, or torture you, or kill you. I’m going to leave you here, and I’m going to go home to my family, and you’re going to be left here with nothing. But I’m not the one you should worry about. Because when I get home I’m going to talk about how you were the link between Mount Weather and ALIE. They’ll come looking for you. They might even make you a deal. Promise to protect you. But they can’t, can they? Because we found you, easy as you please. We’ll know where you are. We’ll know what you’re doing. And if you even think of letting them catch you, if you think of sticking your neck out again, we’ll be there.” She smiles a crowd-winning smile. “So you better run, Carl. And you better keep running. Don’t stop to find a home or make a friend because that will get you killed.” Her smile grows. “And I hope you live forever.”

Raven puts her hands on her hips. “They trashed my pillows,” she says, staring in dismay at the wreck in her apartment. “My pillows. Is nothing sacred?”

Certainly not Stormtrooper pillows. Bellamy just sighs, dumping another bag into the garbage bin they’ve wedged in the hall. The stuffing has been torn out of all of his soft things as well, his food left strewn over the floor, his books in tatters. He’d had that copy of the *Iliad* all through his incarceration, but he hadn’t brought it that last night.

He’d punched a wall when he’d found it, pages torn and missing, cover battered. His mom was in that book, and now she—

“Assholes,” is what he says, because he can’t unleash that violence near Raven. Not near anybody.

“I can’t believe you turned my room into storage,” Murphy complains. He’s only joined them in the cleanup process to make fun of them, as far as Bellamy can tell—and because Emori is busy. Long gone are the days that he obeyed Bellamy’s word without question.

“Why not?” Monroe asks. “You left, and we needed a way to set the booby traps.”

“Why are you here, anyway?” Harper has a lot of broken glass wrapped in a towel, and though she’s putting it carefully into the bin, she looks like she might be considering slicing Murphy’s neck open with it. Bellamy can’t endorse that, exactly, but he spent most of his morning trying to keep O from gutting the attorney taking her deposition, so he’s about out of fucks. He never had Clarke’s talent for people: Bellamy can rally them to a cause, but Clarke can keep them in line. “I thought you were helping Clarke with her errand.”

“Nah. I’m not one to hold a grudge.”

A round of scoffs, and a big guffaw from Miller’s apartment.

“He wants to spend time with his *girlfriend,*” Raven says, sing-song style. Murphy scowls.

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Awww.” Harper leans over the garbage bin to pat him on the arm. “Did she turn you down? Because I saw you drawing ‘Murphy heart Emori’ in your notebooks—”
“Fuck off—”

“Murphy and Emori. Memori!”

“Go fuck yourself, Raven.”

“Sure thing.” She winks at Murphy before disappearing back into her room with an empty bag, leaving Bellamy to remember that time that he had watched Raven fuck herself. Before she’d fucked him.

That had been a weird time.

It was pretty hot, though.

He needs to get laid. It certainly seems like everyone else is doing it—Octavia and Lincoln are off who-knows-where, hopefully not doing who-knows-what while her leg heals. Harper and Monty are going to hook up any day now, Miller’s been sneaking off to see Bryan, and Clarke. Well. The less said on that the better: he’d gotten several emails over the past few days, offering him huge sums of money if he would get a picture of Clarke and Lexa in a compromising position. He’d forwarded the first one to Clarke with a message asking if she wanted to go for it so they could split the money fifty-fifty. Clarke had sent back a picture of Lexa with a knife captioned ‘sorry, bae says no.’

(He’s not jealous of Clarke and Lexa, no matter what people seem to think. He loves Clarke, of course he does—and while it’s not familial, he’s not sure it’s romantic, either. They’re partners and co-conspirators and that relationship is not easily defined, nor expanded into anything else. If they got involved, they’d implode, and take Sky Crew with them. Which isn’t to say he won’t be watching Lexa as closely as he watches Lincoln.)

Moving back into their old apartments is probably bad, security-wise, but Monty is the only one who was able to get his job back. And the constant depositions and meetings with lawyers haven’t left much time for a job hunt, so here they are.

With the addition of his broken plates, the garbage bin is full, so he tugs the bag out and slings it awkwardly over his shoulder. It’s heavier than it probably should be, but it’s double-bagged, and so he just hopes everyone wrapped up their glass properly and it isn’t going to tear open on the stairs.

“You’re the hero we deserve,” Monty says.

“Yeah, we wouldn’t want Murphy to strain himself or anything.” In truth, Bellamy needs the air. It’s not like he had a lot of possessions, but he’s been living in this apartment for years: it had filled up with his Goodwill dishes and books and some of Clarke’s art. Somehow he’d imagined being able to walk back into his life, once ALIE was gone. But when he’d gone back to the museum, they’d said thanks for helping save us from the AI, now please go away, you’ll make people uncomfortable. And now his home is wrecked and—

And, outside, he isn’t tall enough to hold open the lid to the dumpster and also fit in the giant garbage bag. He has to jump a few times to get enough leverage to throw the lid all the way back, and then half kick the bag into it, and then squeeze around back to close the lid again. Fortunately for posterity, there are two photographers there to capture the scene.

Show time, Blake.

This is also part of why he’s been taking more excuses to go outside. They’ll catch on soon enough, but no one seems to be very clear on what his power is, so he walks over to them, as
nonthreatening as possible. Clicking increases.

“No chance I can talk you out of posting my fight with the garbage online?” he asks when he reaches them. Shoulders relaxed. Hands loose. Friendly.

One of them winks at him. She’s a woman. Small. Blonde. “Trade you for an interview,” she says.

“No can do,” Bellamy says. “The apartment won’t clean itself.” They’re getting a conversation with him, they’re not on guard, so he sticks out a hand. “Nice to meet you, though. Bellamy Blake.”

The woman introduces herself and shakes his hand, and as he thinks about her, he can feel the slight tug of her presence. The man next to her accepts the handshake as well, and he makes a mental note of the names, and tries not to look like he’s making a hasty retreat.

He’s been keeping a paper list of all the reporters and photographers encountered around the Dropship building, and going through a mental scan of them before anyone leaves. That Sky Crew still patrols is a bit of an open secret, but they have to stick almost entirely to the rooftops now. Part of him thinks they should give it up: the rest of him remembers that a huge fraction of the police force is either horrible or injured, and people have come to trust them.

With the press and the lawyers and the looming judgment, they all need something to make them feel normal.

And with the Coalition straining under the weight of the investigation, tensions are rising. A few days ago, he and Connor had had to intervene in a fight between Arkadians and some guys from Easton, of all places, what the fuck ever.

It’ll calm down. It always does.

He climbs back up the stairs, ready to fill another bag with the remainders of his life.

—just when you thought 2016 couldn’t top itself, we are here to remind you that it is only June, and superheroes are real. They are real, and they just helped save thousands of people from—I shit you not—a mind-controlling computer program. Yeah. This leaves us with even more questions—what can they do? How long have they been operating? And, most importantly, which ones would win in Celebrity Boxing match-ups?

“IT goes on for like, thirty minutes. It’s almost topped the Donald Trump segment,” Bryan says, pausing over John Oliver’s face. “Word is he was going to do one on the Commander, but it’s all still so classified he just tweeted a bunch of memes instead.”

“Wish we were still that classified,” Nate says. The street below them looks empty, but that doesn’t mean all that much. He’s not actually on patrol right now, but he’s had a hard time staying inside. Too many weeks bunkered down at Lexa’s tower. And he can’t stop seeing strangers going through his apartment. “Bell’s got tabs on like, thirty reporters. He won’t admit it but I think it’s giving him massive headaches. Kane said that last week a couple reporters staged a mugging, trying to catch us out: they got him instead, probably won’t try it again, but…”

“Jesus.” Bryan peeks over the building’s edge as well, now. “Well, maybe you should talk to them.
They’re getting desperate. Haven’t you seen how much they’re grasping?”

No. No, he’s been trying to keep his head down as much as possible. “Isn’t that what I have you for, media manager?”

“Don’t laugh. Who else would defend you on twitter?”

Nate has walked into battle. He has not dared to wade into twitter. “What are they saying on twitter?”

Bryan’s shrug is felt more than seen as his shoulder brushes up against Nate’s. “You know.”

“No, I actually don’t.”

“You’re what The System made you, you’re victims, you’re power hungry monsters, you’re heroes, you’re manipulating everybody and planning world domination, Lexa’s a genius and example to women everywhere, Lexa’s a fascist, Lexa is the military complex taking over cities, Lexa is rebelling against the military complex that violated her DNA, it’s all Hillary Clinton’s fault and she killed her friend to cover it up, you guys are the future, you should volunteer yourselves for study because we should give other people superpowers, you shouldn’t because the country and world clearly can’t be trusted with that power, Clarke’s a feminist hero, Clarke’s a slut, you all should be tried for assault and probably murder, Bellamy’s very existence is a violation of our right to privacy, oh and Alex Jones thinks the whole thing is fake, and—”

“I get it.” It’s about what Nate had imagined, all the nights he’s been kept up by thoughts of what it will mean when they become public. He’s a black gay man with infrared and x-ray vision and there’s a not insignificant amount of the population that’s going to find that idea terrifying. Someone is lingering on the street below, and he can’t tell if it’s a resident or a snoop. “Raven dug up something that’ll tint our windows like cars, make it a little harder to spy on us, now they’ve figured out where we live. Our neighbors keep stopping by and saying that they’re not going to tell reporters anything,” but that’s starting to make it worse. The reminder that they could, that some of them probably already have, that they’re only telling Sky Crew this to vindicate themselves somehow.

“Stop me if this is too far out there,” Bryan says, “but have you considered like. Moving.”

“Most places don’t have ten— eleven, I guess, now Murphy’s back— apartments open at once.” Twelve, if Wells wants to get out of his dad’s house. He’s gone through enough for them that Nate would be willing to induct him as honorary member. “And that’s even if we could afford to live anywhere. Which we can’t. Because we all lost our jobs.” And even if they hadn’t, they wouldn’t pass any background checks. He thinks that generally what people in their situation do is give tell-all interviews and get sponsored by like, UnderArmor or something. Nate thinks he’d do a great UnderArmor commercial. Except he’s not sure if he’s going to be charged as an accessory to the murder of Wallace and Tsing— technically that was Connor, but they’ll never hear that from Nate — and companies probably don’t like that.

“Um,” Bryan says. “Yeah, about the money thing.”

“What?”

“There’s a GoFundMe. For legal fees. And medical bills. And other things. There’s a lot of money raised so far. Like, a lot of money.” Bryan’s gestures, his hands lit by the yellow light from the street. “The media and twitter and thinkpiece writers can say what they want, but the people in Polis know what you guys did. And they want to help.”
There’s something warm growing in Nate’s chest. “And you had nothing to do with this, huh?”

“Well.” Bryan ducks his head. “I mean. I may have talked to Thelonious Jaha. And Marcus Kane. And my stepdad. And some of the doctors at the hospital where they treated you guys after the fight. And some of the doctors at the hospital where Clarke worked. And some other people you’ve helped in the past. But it was mostly them.”

Nate kisses him.

It just seems like the thing to do.

“As for the other thing, why do you guys need to all live next to each other, anyway?” Bryan asks, several minutes later. It takes Nate a second to remember the conversation thread.

“Clarke and Bellamy say it’s better for security. Nobody booby traps like Raven. If we were on our own, someone could pick us off one by one.”

“That’s dark,” Bryan says. “Wait, they say?”

Well. “I think Bellamy believes it. I think Clarke has weighed the risk of someone blowing us all up at once against the risk that living far apart will hold us less accountable to each other. Make us more likely to implicate others to get our own deals. Go to the magazines if we need cash.”

“That’s…”

Nate shrugs. It’s how Clarke operates, and while he often dislikes her for it, he can’t deny that she’s kept most of them alive this far. She turned over her boyfriend to keep the rest of them safe. And he’s glad she did, because if she hadn’t, Nate was going to do it himself. And the others forgave Clarke more readily than they would have forgiven him, since they knew what Finn meant to her.

“As someone with a vested interest in my privacy,” he says, “I can’t say I mind.” Because then they’ll come after Bryan, and Bryan already knows more than he should. And he won’t have as big an interest in protecting the others. So Nate’s been careful, trying to give him plausible deniability whenever anything related to death or permanent injury comes up. Because while the chipped people they killed could be argued for self defense, there’s still the gunman Nate killed—self defense won’t apply to that, since he hadn’t been shooting at Nate at the time. There’s still Wallace and Tsing and Finn and, hell, the Arker gang members from years ago. A body has been found stabbed to death at the bottom of Bluelake, and Nate has a feeling that Clarke knows something about that.

But. “Let’s not talk about Clarke,” Nate says, and Bryan readily agrees.

Now that everyone in Sky Crew knows her closest secret—Aden—Lexa has been trying out things like being social and having friends. It’s not to butter up Clarke, no matter what Titus thinks, and it’s not to make them less likely to betray her in the courtroom, no matter what Indra thinks. It’s just…

Something she’s trying.
And she knows Indra and Octavia have been training together lately, and Raven and Anya have been scheming on some kind of robot, so clearly she’s not the only one.

It means it’s not unusual to come home to find people besides Titus and Aden in her apartment. So she’s not surprised to see Clarke, Aden and Wells Jaha on the couches, watching that TV show she’s forbidden Aden from watching at least ten times.

What’s slightly more unusual is that Clarke’s got her shirt off, and Wells is rubbing his hands on her back.

“You know,” Lexa says, “I could pay all my lawyers for a year if I took a picture of that.”

Aden jumps for the remote. Wells just waves.

“You weren’t here,” Clarke complains, words muffled by the pillows. She sits up a tiny bit before continuing. “How’d the deposition go?”

Wells squirts another bit of lotion into his palm before dabbing again at the ink on Clarke’s spine.


“Sounds about right.”

Grounder’s lawyers are top notch, she can’t complain about that. The company has stood by her, insisting that there is nothing illegal about hiring someone to negotiate contracts, and paying large sums of money for the same. They’re only trying to cover their own asses, but it’s nice to have an ally. Lexa knows where they stand.

Her other supposed ally is a little harder to pin down. Becca’s arrival at the police station, just hours after they had eliminated the City, was certainly convenient. For Becca. But at least she was able to get the prosecution going. Willing to classify records and turn eyes away from the fact that Raven, Anya, Monty and— she’s still not over this— fucking Roan had rather successfully destroyed all remnants of ALIE’s program. The goal was to prevent any future replication. The added result is that it cannot be verified or used as evidence.

It’s probably a good trade.

Probably.

“How was your errand?” Lexa glances to Aden as she says it. Clarke looks to him as well.

“It was fine,” she says. “Did all the things I needed to.”

“All wrapped up then?” Do you need help hiding a body?

“And no issue.”

“Done,” Wells says, leaning back. Clarke sits up, and it turns out she hadn’t taken her shirt off after all: she’s got her arms in it, covering up her front. She turns towards the wall to pull it back over her head. The tattoo is massive, going from her waist up to her shoulder— it’s been the work of several days under Nyko’s needle, and the middle part is starting to flake. “I gotta get back,” Wells continues.

“You’re welcome to stay.” Lexa even means it.
“Thanks. I shouldn’t, though. My dad’s been kinda—” he spreads his fingers out in front of him and tilts his hand back and forth. “Since the City.”

Haven’t they all. “Take care of yourself,” Clarke says.

“Will do.” Wells ruffles Aden’s hair as he passes him, getting a swat in response.

Lexa smiles.

“Ugh,” Clarke says later, sprawling stomach-first onto Lexa’s bed. She turns her head so that it’s pointed at where Lexa is already lying, scrolling through her email. “You know what’s really frustrating?”

Two thousand unread messages accumulated over three days. “What?”

“I was totally planning on having sex tonight. Driving back up north I was just like, I don’t know if I had a latent adrenaline rush or what, but I had plans, Lexa. Plans. And then I got here and you were still out, and then Titus dropped Aden off and Wells came to return a book and we all ended up watching this TV show that was incredibly racist. And now they’re gone and you’re here and I’ve crashed and just want to sleep for a month.”

“That’s tragic,” Lexa says, even though her brain hasn’t quite moved on from the idea of plans. She shifts onto her side as well so that she can run a finger down Clarke’s side, around the edges of her tattoo. The silhouette of eighty-nine birds, one for each dead member of the Wallace hundred. The small one with wings sharp like knives is Charlotte, Clarke had told her, during the two weeks she agonized over the design. The one with the swirly pattern is Maya. And the one made of sharp angles like origami is Finn.

Lexa has a similar bird on her upper arm. If Clarke is going to carry all that death on her back, Lexa’d said, then the least Lexa can do is help carry Clarke. It’s more sentimental than she’s let herself be in the past, but Clarke had gone a bit gooey and kissed the tattoo, flaking skin and all, and had repeated the action many times since.

Of course, that might just be Clarke’s weird fixation with Lexa’s arms. It’s a little baffling, but she has no complaints.

“Tomorrow,” Clarke mumbles. “Wait, no, we’re doing another round of apartment cleaning tomorrow and I gotta put a coating on my windows. Wednesday?”

“Hearings.” Unable to help herself, Lexa leans forward and kisses Clarke’s forehead. “Don’t worry. We’ll figure it out.”

“I love you.” It’s a sleepy admission, but Lexa can’t believe it’s spontaneous. She kisses Clarke again.

“Well, that’s a relief.”

Clarke shoves her, and Lexa laughs, settling in next to her.
“You, too.” It’s the closest she can get right now, but Clarke seems to understand. She makes a little humming sound, pressing closer. Close enough that Lexa feels a bit weightless on her front, from her chin down to her toes.

It feels a bit like flying.

Chapter End Notes

Well, here we are.

It's been a hell of a year, in my life, and the world, and I'm sure for many of you as well. This story was never supposed to take as long as it did, but so it goes. I want to thank everyone who's been here since the beginning, and leaving encouraging comments: you guys are amazing. And to those who are reading at some point in the future: you're also awesome, and I'd love to hear from you :)

Some facts from this verse I was unfortunately unable to incorporate: Murphy's superhero name is Revel, as in Revelation. People kept mishearing it and calling him Rebel, and it drove him nuts.

To the people who wanted more smut: :/ I wasn't super confident about doing that, and it's easy enough to find this from knowing me IRL, so that's why there isn't any. Also a lot of plot was happening. With that said, if you want to write smut set in this verse, I support you. Clarke's powers lend themselves to sexual creativity.

For those interested, my next project is going to be a Black Sails inspired Marvel Pirate AU. I'm still deep in research mode (there was a historical pirate ship called the Avenger, apparently, which is awesome) so it won't be up for a while, but you won't need to watch Black Sails to understand it, although I highly recommend it because Black Sails is the bisexual pirate show we all deserve.

Ste yuj, my Crew.

End Notes

talk to me on tumblr

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