Before Words, Beyond Silence

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Summary

A re-imagining from the Pilot:

Clarke Griffin is rudely taken from her cell in the middle of the night only to be forced into a room with the man she hates the most - the man who floated her father - Thelonius Jaha.

He then informs her that she will be sent to Earth almost immediately to determine whether or not the ground is survivable again in the hopes of saving their people from certain doom.

Alone.

On top of it all, the fate of 98 other adolescent prisoners rests on her succeeding in this mission.

In other words: she's screwed.

Before she knows it, she's hurtling towards the planet at top speed with no control over the contraption that's presumably carrying her to her death.

After she somehow manages to survive the crash landing, she finds herself alone in unknown
lands struggling to fight through the pain of her extensive injuries.

Only, she's not alone. Far from it, in fact.

Who are these strange inhabitants whose language is so different from her own? Why does she get the feeling she's just walked into a much bigger problem than the one she left behind on the Ark?

More importantly: how is she going to survive?

Notes

Hellooo to anyone reading this!! Welcome to my first-ever fanfiction lol. What better universe to write about than that of The 100?? More specifically, what better characters than CLEXA?!

Despite a messy third season filled with terrible deaths and unexplained plot developments, I'm still addicted to this show and the world it's created. So why not fill the hiatus with some fanfiction?

It's going to be quite divergent from canon but some things will definitely remain the same. Lots of description and world-building, so you've been forewarned: it's a reeeeaallyyyy slow burn. But hopefully an interesting one (:.

Anyways, I hope you enjoy!! Critiques and commentary are highly welcomed. I've never done this before so I guess I'm just wingin it.

Thanks for reading (:.

See the end of the work for more notes.
A Rude Awakening

Chapter One

Clarke Griffin should've worn better shoes.

That was one of the first thoughts she had as she hurtled towards Earth in the rickety escape pod she had woken up in only moments before. More precisely, that was the only thought she could allow herself to focus on in her current predicament. Anything else would be too much to bear.

She knew something was wrong when she had been forcefully awakened and dragged out of her solitary cell by the collar of her shirt in the dead of night. Too stunned and groggy to make a move in protest, Clarke allowed herself to be pulled out of the room and along the eerily-quiet corridors leading from the multi-leveled high-security prison that had been her home in the Ark for the past three months. Two guards flanked her on either side while another - the largest of them all, she noted - steered her through the halls by the collar at the back of her shirt. The guard's grip reminded Clarke of a steel enclosure, and she chanced a glance over her left shoulder to try and get a better look at her captor. Before she could get a full view of the man in her periphery, she felt herself being shoved forward and slightly back again in a jarring motion. It sent her stumbling for a moment before the guard tightened his grip further - if that was even possible - and steadied her enough to push her more quickly through the halls. Clarke found his manhandling to be completely unnecessary and unsurprising at the same time.

After what seemed like ages of walking through identical-looking hallways in complete silence save for the sound of their collective footfalls and the constant hum of the Ark around them, the group finally halted in front of a set of sealed doors. Clarke kept her head facing forward but allowed her eyes to roam about, trying discreetly to figure out where they had taken her. Despite the guards obstructing her sight on both sides, she managed to catch a glimpse of the empty hallway that extended to her left and right without apparent end. With a start, Clarke realized that she had absolutely no idea where she was.

Her heart rate picked up significantly as the doors in front of her slid open, revealing a small, minimally-lit room without windows. The only exit appeared to be the doors through which Clarke was now being pushed. The guards who had flanked her immediately retreated back to stand in the hallway, two on either side of the doors. Clarke was pushed forward a couple steps by the guard who still had her by the shirt, and she heard the doors slide shut behind them moments later.

Directly in front of her was what appeared to be the only piece of furniture in the entire room: a metallic table with a chair on either side, directly opposite one another. Clarke was forced forward and down into the chair harshly. Before she could process what was happening or move to react, the guard grabbed both of her hands from down by her sides in one of his and placed them on the table in front of her. From behind, he reached around with the hand not holding hers and encircled her wrists in handcuffs with one swift motion.

She turned slightly in her chair to gawk at him and was met with hard eyes and a blank expression set into an aged face that she didn't recognize. Without a word, he slowly backed up to stand against the wall to the left of the door with his arms crossed in front of him. He went completely still and stared forwards impassively.
With a gulp, Clarke slowly turned back around and began to assess her surroundings. She was in what appeared to be some kind of interrogation room - the likes of which she knew existed but had never actually been able to find during her frequent explorations of the Ark growing up. From what she understood, the council members and "higher-ups," as her father had liked to call them, only reserved these rooms for operations of utmost secrecy and importance. Despite the pang of unimaginable sadness that coursed through her body at the thought of her father, Clarke suddenly found herself growing more and more anxious as the seconds passed.

What could they possibly want from her that required such secrecy? And why during the middle of the night? Surely no one was going to stumble upon their location regardless of the time of day. The gears in her mind worked furiously through her grogginess and continued to swirl these thoughts around until her anxiety had reached a fever pitch.

Her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a stirring in the dark right corner of the room. Thelonius Jaha slowly emerged from the darkness and came to stand before her on the opposite side of the table. He held his hands loosely in front of him and regarded her with a stoic expression.

Clarke's heart rate picked up exponentially and her posture went rigid. She sat up impossibly straight and leaned forward slightly, sliding her handcuffed hands further forward on the table and regarding the man who had floated her father with seething hatred.

"What the hell do you want, Jaha?" she spat, refusing to give the man any semblance of respect by addressing him by his proper title. Unmoved, he ignored her and stepped forward, placing both of his hands on the back of the chair sat opposite her.

"It's been a while since I last saw you, Clarke. How are you doing?" He laced the question with what sounded like genuine concern and curiosity and it made Clarke's skin crawl. Her expression hardened further and her eyes flared.

"It's not like you actually fucking care," she growled menacingly. She couldn't believe the audacity this man had, standing before her and questioning her well-being after all that he'd done.

Her father had been trying to tell the truth about the state of the Ark in the hopes that everyone would come together to figure out a way to save themselves. Jake Griffin had always been an honest and hopeful man, and everything that he had done in his adult life was to try and make things better for everyone - particularly his wife and daughter, who he loved more than anything. After his own wife failed to support his decision to come forward with the truth, Clarke had vowed to stand by his side regardless.

Her only mistake had been in trusting her now-former best friend, Wells, with the truth. If only she could go back in time and prevent that conversation from ever happening, maybe her father would have succeeded. Maybe the people would have rallied behind him and Jaha would've had no choice but to absolve him of any crimes committed. Maybe he would still be alive.

The reality of her situation brought Clarke out of her musings, though, and she found herself staring into the conflicted eyes of her father's murderer.

"I don't remember you having such a bad mouth," he huffed, shaking his head slightly. He met her gaze again with a sudden intensity. "Regardless, whether I do or do not care about you is not what I've brought you here to discuss." He made to sit down in the chair slowly, never taking his intense gaze off of her. Then, without preamble,

"We're sending you to the ground, Clarke."

She blinked. All of the thoughts swirling around in her brain suddenly came to an abrupt stop. Her
mouth went dry and her blood ran cold as her hands started to tingle. She couldn't possibly have heard him correctly.

"E-excuse me?" she stammered, struggling to speak past the constricting of her throat. Jaha eyed her carefully.

"You heard me correctly, Clarke. We're sending you to Earth. We've prepared a pod for your departure as soon as you and I finish here." He sat back in the chair and crossed his arms in front of him, still refusing to break eye contact.

Clarke suddenly felt as if she was going to faint. In the back of her mind, she recognized that it probably wasn't healthy for her heart to be beating as fast as it was, but she was powerless to control it. It felt as if an invisible force was pressing into her chest, causing her breaths to come out short and stuttering. Her hands and feet began to feel numb, and her arms became impossibly heavier as they pressed down into the table before her. Her vision became black around the edges and it sounded like she was hearing everything from under water.

This had to be some kind of sick joke.

"I-I don't underst-stand..." she managed, fighting to maintain consciousness. Her voice had taken on a strange metallic quality. She barely registered Jaha leaning forward again to place one of his hands atop hers. She was too far gone to move away from him as he took a deep breath to explain.

"In the wake of your father's discovery, the council and I have decided that it is imperative to find out if the earth is inhabitable again. In the interests of our people, we agreed that it would be best to send someone who is...qualified, shall we say, to make the assessment properly. Who better than the daughter of the engineer who uncovered our dire situation in the first place?" He finished, attempting to lighten the mood with underhanded flattery. The anger this sparked in Clarke brought her slightly back from the brink of unconsciousness.


"We don't have the time to argue semantics now, Clarke."

"The hell we don't!" she practically shouted. She began to rise from her chair, a sudden burst of energy coursing through her veins. She heard the guard positioned behind her at the door begin to shuffle forward. Jaha put up a hand to halt his movement and looked expectantly at Clarke from his sitting position.

"Why me? Why not send one of your precious scientists to do the job? And don't give me any of that bullshit about my being an engineer's daughter," she finished, leaning forward slightly and placing her hands on the table in fists, knuckles down. She tried to make her stance as imposing as possible, but Jaha didn't seem phased.

"Fine," he conceded, pushing up from the chair and crossing his arms in front of his chest again. Clarke raised her head slightly to meet his gaze with intensity of her own as he stood. She refused to let any more weakness take hold of her, whether it was visible or not.

"You're right. You are expendable, Clarke. Expendable and smart." He moved suddenly and was walking around the table to stand beside her. She turned to face him as he continued.

"Originally, we considered sending all 98 prisoners down to Earth together. This way, we would have more bodies on the ground to analyze conditions and make broader assessments for us. However," he paused, giving her a once-over with his eyes, "we determined that the logistics of that operation would be far too complicated to carry out. Especially considering the amount of variables
involved in sending a bunch of hapless kids to fend for themselves in unknown territory for an unknown amount of time. By sending you alone, we will be much better equipped to monitor your activity and analyze your vital signs in a much more in-depth manner. Think of it as a solo mission - a highly important one, at that."

Clarke broke eye contact momentarily to process everything Jaha was saying. She had so many questions and things she wanted to say but she didn't know where to begin. She decided to start with the most pressing thought on her mind.

"My mom would never allow this to happen. She wouldn't just let you send me to the ground without warning!" By the end of her statement, her voice had noticeably risen with what could only be described as desperation. She could feel panic overtaking her again.

"Unfortunately, your mother does not have a say in this matter. She has been removed from the council until further deliberation can be made." His words were cold and unfeeling as he looked at Clarke. This caused her panic to spike even further and she began to sway on her feet.

"Do-does she even know?" she whispered so quietly that Jaha had to lean forward, a questioning look on his face.

"Does. She. KNOW?" Clarke yelled this time. Jaha, once again, seemed unmoved by her show of emotion. She couldn't believe she had grown up practically idolizing this man. She didn't even recognize the person standing before her now.

"She does. She assisted in the design of the bracelet that will help us keep track of you. She will personally see to the monitoring of your vitals once you are on the ground." He spoke with the cool demeanor of one completely detached from the situation. Clarke registered that she was currently looking into the eyes of the impartial Chancellor, not those of the father of her best friend. She realized that he was probably forcing this demeanor upon himself in order to carry out this desperate mission. If he saw her as anything other than an expendable prisoner, he probably wouldn't be able to do what needed to be done and send her to her all-but-certain demise.

Clarke mustered all of her remaining strength to find her voice again.

"The earth isn't supposed to be inhabitable for another hundred years. Assuming I survive the descent into the atmosphere, I'll be dead as soon as I hit the ground anyways!" She spoke with passion now.

"The radiation levels aren't survivable! I probably won't even be able to find drinkable water, and it's highly unlikely that I'll actually be able to figure out how to hunt in time to save my own ass! What the hell do you expect me to do?!" She was yelling at the top of her lungs now.

Her gaze was leveled with his and she allowed all of the unbridled hatred that she was feeling to shine through in her eyes. Her posture was rigid as she stepped into his personal space, refusing to back down now.

She could barely keep up with the roller coaster of emotions overtaking her at this point. One minute, she was on the verge of passing out; the next, she was seeing red. She knew she couldn't keep this up forever. Eventually, her energy would fade completely.

In fact, she was beginning to waver slightly under the fiery returning gaze Jaha was giving her now. He took a small step towards her and now they were practically chest-to-chest in a confrontation of wills.

"We're taking a leap of faith with you now, Clarke Griffin. You should be flattered that we are trusting you with such an important mission." His voice was deadly quiet as they stared into each
other's eyes. Clarke clenched her jaw and balled her hands into white-knuckled fists in front of her.

"Flattered?! You're telling me to be FLATTERED that you're sending me to my fucking death against my will?!!" she spat at top volume. Jaha held his ground.

"You lost your so-called 'will' the moment you decided to break the law and attempt to act against my wishes!" He was yelling now, too. He visibly fought with his ability to maintain some semblance of composure as he swallowed.

"Besides," he said, more quietly now, "We aren't sending you completely empty-handed. In fact, we're putting somewhat of a strain on our resources in order to give you enough food and water to last for eight days. We'll also be giving you a first aid kit and a pack of multi-purpose supplies that you should find to your liking." He raised his eyebrow at the last part, causing Clarke to narrow her eyes slightly.

"And what happens when I run out of these so-called supplies?" Clarke questioned flatly.

Jaha smirked at this. "Then you find some more." He took a step back now, motioning for the guard still stationed at the door to come over. "Your teacher, Charles Pike, tells me that you always exceeded in his Earth Skills class. You'll do well to remember his lessons now."

With that, he stepped back further allowing the guard to step directly in front of Clarke. Before she could process what was happening, she felt something sharp go into her neck. Her eyes widened and she stumbled backwards with the overwhelming feeling of unconsciousness. The guard instantly caught her by both shoulders and held her up as her legs turned to jelly.

Before she lost herself to the blackness threatening her vision completely, she heard Jaha speak from behind the guard:

"Help us bring our people to the ground, Clarke. If you cannot do it, we will be floating the rest of the prisoners within two months time to conserve resources. Whatever happens, their fate is in your hands."

With that, everything in Clarke's world suddenly faded to black.

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A large bang and a terrifying jolt were what startled Clarke awake. She blinked rapidly against the lingering drowsiness fogging her mind. For a brief moment, she forgot about her meeting with Jaha and her current "mission."

That is, until she looked down.

Starting below where her feet were hanging and extending up above her head was a huge glass window to the outside world. A world, Clarke realized, that she was currently hurtling towards at top speed. In the middle of the window - right about Clarke's chest level - was a control panel that stretched around her on either side. There were so many buttons and switches littering the panel that she wouldn't have known where to start even if she had any knowledge of this kind of technology in the first place.

Exceptionally disoriented, Clarke reached forward to place a steadying hand on the console. She was grateful to no longer be in handcuffs.

To her surprise, she was jerked back into the chair almost immediately by a cross-sectioned seatbelt that held her firmly in place.
"Seriously?" Clarke huffed as she tugged a little on the straps. They weren't budging.

She began to hyperventilate.

Everything was wrong. So incredibly wrong. Every fiber of her being was screaming at her to get the hell out of this pod. If she somehow managed to do that, though, she would most certainly die a slow and painful death floating off into space to succumb to suffocation and pressure changes.

How had she wound up here? Surely, the universe couldn't hate her that much.

To watch her father die only a few months beforehand due to the betrayal of her best friend, only to be locked up in solitary confinement after attempting to finish his honest quest. Then to be forced into an ancient escape pod by her former best friend's father tasked with saving the rest of their people - at the potential expense of 98 other teenagers if she failed, as well. Hurtling towards a planet that was almost-certainly unsurvivable for a plethora of reasons.

Despite her horrendous circumstance, the thought that truly sent her over the edge was this: she didn't get to say goodbye. To her mother; to her friends; to her room; to anything.

The thought of her mother's kind eyes brought a guttural sob up from the very depths of Clarke's being. Her already-labored breathing became even more ragged as she thrashed about in her seat. She lost every ounce of control as she was rendered a complete mess, occasional screams making their way out from a place Clarke didn't even know existed within her.

Through her thrashing and sobbing, Clarke could only just make out the scene before her.

The world stood before her a taunting mass. Though its beauty was never lost on her from what she could see from the Ark, this sight in front of her was something else to behold, entirely.

In her frantic state, it seemed to Clarke as though some higher power had taken the most heavenly blue and splashed it across a blank canvas, swirling it with occasional greens, browns, and whites. Only to overlay the entire canvas with an ambient glow that seemed altogether inviting yet incredibly foreboding all the same. A glow that was currently swallowing her whole with everything it had.

An impossibly loud and violent jolt suddenly resounded through the pod. The entire vessel began to shake and rattle around her, jarring her already-frazzled body impossibly further into oblivion. She had never felt anything so violent in her entire life, the thrashing now coming from the pod around her and causing her to bang her head back against the seat over and over again.

Absently, Clarke realized that she must've entered the atmosphere. In the same moment - and with a final jolt of all-encompassing panic - she realized she had no control over what was happening.

She was either going to die in a burst of flames as the pod broke apart from so much jarring pressure and heat, or she was going to plummet straight into the ground with the inability to slow the damn thing down.

This was the last coherent thought she had as she was once again swallowed up into a dark abyss.

Hopefully this time it would be permanent.
Chapter Notes

This one's pretty lengthy...

A lot of internal monologue and Clarke getting her bearings. The first couple of chapters are definitely setting a tone and building things up for the way I imagine the story going. Hopefully you'll stick with it through the build up (: Things are certainly not going to be as Clarke expected...

A familiar (and friendly) face shows up, as well.

Enjoy!!

The first thing Clarke became aware of was the pounding.

It resonated inside every dimension of her skull and threatened to render her unconscious once again. Surely it wasn't possible for her head to hurt this badly. It shouldn't be possible, at the very least.

And yet.

Ever so slowly, Clarke blinked her eyes open. The first thing that greeted her was blinding light. She immediately shut her eyes again.

Okay, so maybe she was dead. That's what she had been hoping for anyways. Maybe the universe had finally given her what she wanted for once.

Except, she was pretty sure that there wouldn't be this much pain in death. There couldn't be. If there was, why in the hell would everyone refer to it as such a "sweet release"?

Accepting the fact that she was more than likely not dead, Clarke tried opening one eye ever so slightly. The light assaulted her eye once again and she grunted with the effort of keeping it open. Slowly but surely, she adjusted and opened her other eye just as narrowly. Once she was sure that both of her pupils had adjusted, she gradually opened her both of her eyes the rest of the way.

What she saw was utterly confusing.

She was in a room. The light that had greeted her was streaming in from a giant window on her left, the glass from which was completely gone. The effect of the light streaming in around the broken panes caused it to come in glorious streams that spread all across the room.

The room, itself, was relatively dull. From Clarke's half-lying position against the back wall, she was able to take the place in entirely. The walls and ceiling were all made up of some kind of wooden panels. They seemed to be perfectly in tact - which surprised Clarke greatly - and the structure, as a whole, seemed to be relatively stable. A closed door, also made of the same wood, sat directly opposite Clarke on the other side of the room. She would have to see what was on the other side of it as soon as she determined whether or not she could move properly.

She noted that she was half-sitting, half-lying against one of the walls that met the solid floor beneath her. She recognized the surface as a type of plain cement. There were cracks that ran along
the length of it here and there, with leaves and branches of all sorts strewn across the floor every which way. There was no furniture whatsoever.

In the back of her mind, Clarke thought that it reminded her of the types of log cabins that she would read about in books as a kid.

Realizing that she hadn't moved save for opening her eyes, Clarke decided to see what her body was capable of beyond the blinding pain in her head.
She brought a trembling hand up to her face and was immediately struck somewhat ill by the amount of cuts and gashes she felt marring her skin every which way. She ran her fingers up into her hair and felt the unmistakeable crunch of dried blood caked into the tendrils.

She had to swallow down the bile rising in her throat in order to continue with her assessments. She had to remember her training.

Ever so carefully, she begin to poke and prod at every spot around her the front of her face to the back of her skull and neck. She was incredibly surprised and exceptionally relieved to note that the gashes seemed to be somewhat superficial and not demanding of stitches.

However, there were definitely more than enough to explain the amount of blood all over her person, smudged on her hands, chest, and any other bits of exposed skin. They would need to be cleaned thoroughly once she could find a water source.

With newfound motivation, she slowly moved her hands from her lap to palms-down by her sides. As she began to press down into the floor with the lightest of pressure, she suddenly felt a white hot pain shoot up her arms and into her shoulders. The pain was so intense that she could barely make a sound in protest. She could feel her face go completely pale.

Apparently her arms weren't going to be of any use at the moment. She would have to figure out why that was when she felt a little less like passing out.

Taking a couple of deep breaths with her head resting against the wall, Clarke decided to test her legs. They were splayed out in front of her slightly bent at the knees, and she ventured a wiggle of her toes on both feet. When it didn't cause her any pain, she began to roll her ankles in a gentle motion. Again, no pain.

She could work with this.

When she tried to bend her knees a bit to bring her legs closer to her, though, she immediately regretted it.
Instantly, a white hot pain not unlike that which she had felt in her arms immediately shot through her legs and she was forced to let them flop back to their original position - which only added to the pain, of course. The sensations wracking her body were so intense that she had no other choice but to remain stock-still until they passed. Because her head was pounding so severely on top of that, she couldn't even begin to venture a guess as to what was so horribly wrong with her.

All she knew was that it definitely wasn't good.

After the intense pain subsided, her entire body settled into a dull throbbing ache that she found slightly more bearable. She adjusted her head a little bit to look at what she was sitting on, as it became apparent that it wasn't just concrete. Beneath her was a blue tarp of some kind that felt a little like thick plastic to her fingertips. Resting her head back against the wall, she was grateful for what little padding it was providing for her seemingly numb bottom at this point.

She was too tired to try and contemplate how in the world she'd gotten to this place - or how, for that
matter, she had even survived the pod landing to begin with. She allowed her eyes to close again and as she sunk into a dreamless sleep, she told herself that she would worry about all of that later.

If she even woke up again, that is.

Unfortunately for Clarke, she did, in fact, wake up again. This time, though, the pounding in her head had lessened slightly, allowing for a more coherent train of thought to begin forming.

She opened her eyes to what she, at first, believed to be total darkness. Blinking rapidly, she slowly adjusted to the lack of light in the cabin. She allowed her eyes to focus on the window to her left, noting that there appeared to be moonlight streaming in - although her view was obstructed by what she assumed were trees. She would have to wait until it was light again to be able to make out whatever was outside of that window in detail.

With the pain in her head slightly lessening, Clarke decided to test her limbs again. As her arms were already resting palms-down on the floor beside her, she decided to try to push herself up again. Although there was still some relatively intense pain in her right arm, it was nothing like the blinding sensations that had befallen her previously. She took this as a good sign.

Perhaps her muscles were simply stiff.

Slowly but surely, she worked herself up to a straighter sitting position with her hands guiding her backwards. When her arms began to quiver with the effort of it all, she decided to shift a bit of her weight off of her left hand and onto her dominant right.

Bad idea.

Without warning, her arm buckled beneath her and she went crashing down sideways onto her right side.

The blinding pain was back immediately. It shot through her right shoulder and resounded all throughout her body, leaving her a trembling mess the moment her torso hit the concrete. Through the pain, she assessed that her right arm was either badly broken or her shoulder dislocated. Maybe both.

She registered a moment later that she must've screamed.

Laying on her right side with her arm set at a weird angle beneath her and her legs now closer to her chest, she allowed another strangled cry to rip through her chest as her body trembled.

Moments later, the door at the other side of the room suddenly burst open.

Standing in the doorframe bathed in moonlight was a young boy. Based on his height and stature, he couldn't have been more than ten years old. She was paralyzed as her mind began to spin out of control.

She couldn't believe it. Here stood before her another human being on what she had believed to be a completely unsurvivable - and uninhabited - planet. How was that possible? How was it that a child so young could survive on a planet that was supposed to be so radioactive and harsh? Surely there had to be more people along with him. He had to come from somewhere. He couldn't have survived
his elementary years without some form of a guardian, right?

Clarke was completely thrown. Her mind immediately began to go into overdrive turning over all the history lessons she had learned on the Ark. There had to be some kind of logical explanation as to why there were people on the ground when she had grown up her entire life believing that the Earth was completely abandoned. There had to have been some kind of giant mix-up somewhere along the line that prevented the Arkers from realizing that the planet was survivable. Surely, the news of surviving inhabitants on this planet must've gotten lost in translation from one generation of leadership to the next. That was the only explanation Clarke could think up as to why they had stayed on that godforsaken space station for so long. The logistics of that screw-up began to whir around in her mind - the eventual aftermath of which had led Jaha to believe that it was necessary to send Clarke down to the ground to begin with. An aftermath that also included led to her father's now seemingly-pointless demise.

Before she could spiral any further into this train of thought and become lost in her despair and anxiety, Clarke forced her attention back to the figure in front of her.

As her eyes adjusted to the sudden addition of light, she noted that beyond the boy appeared to be a dense forest. She had also been right in her initial assessment; this was a one-room log cabin.

Drawing Clarke's attention back to him, the boy took a hesitant step towards her.

She was immediately enraptured by his features.

He had the most glorious dark skin she had ever seen - roughly the same shade as Wells's, maybe darker - and his face was framed with messy dark braids that came down a little past his ears. His only item of clothing appeared to be a tan loin cloth a few shades lighter than his skin. His childlike stature was emphasized by the roundness of his cheeks and tiny blimp of his stomach, although the rest of him was relatively scrawny.

He took another couple of slow steps towards her as she assessed him. Moments later, he was squatting down in front of her with his arms haphazardly draped over his bent knees. He looked into her eyes with a tilt of his head.

Clarke was struck by the light hazel of the irises that contrasted so starkly with the rest of his features. Hazel irises that were peering inquisitively into her blue ones.

Apart from the questions in his gaze, she was able to discern something else: concern.

She realized absently that she was still trembling quite harshly in her sideways position on the floor. She felt wetness on her face, as well. It didn't surprise her that she had begun to cry at some point during the spasms of pain. Spasms that were slowly starting to subside as she stared at the boy.

She sucked her lower lip between her teeth in the attempt to stop their chattering and maybe quell the whimpers that were now spilling out.

The boy inched forwards in his squatting position and cautiously extended his right arm towards her. Before she could register what he was doing, he slowly settled his tiny hand upon her upturned cheek with utmost gentleness. He then cupped it in the palm of his hand.

Clarke closed her eyes at the sensation, having to fight the tears suddenly stinging the backs of her eyes.

She couldn't remember the last time someone had been so gentle with her. Even before she had been placed in solitary, she had mostly been held firmly in one person or another's solid grasp. They had
been so concerned with holding her together and keeping her from falling apart completely after her father's death that they seem to have disregarded anything less than solidarity. At this moment, though, she realized just how much she had missed this sort of touch.

What a loss it had been to live without until this moment.

As the tears spilled from beneath her eyelids and streamed sideways down her face, she decided on a whim that she could trust this boy. As crazy as it might sound, Clarke believed that anyone who could regard another human being with so much gentle concern almost certainly had to be good.

She needed to believe that.

She opened her eyes again to see that he had moved even closer. He was now so close that she could feel his warm breath on her face as he squatted before her, his hand still cradling her cheek. He slowly sank down to have his legs crossed before him, his free hand flung across his lap.

The boy moved his hand from her cheek to wipe at the tear tracks now lining her marred features. He did so with both hands now, ever so gently, a quietly determined look on his face.

Suddenly, he began to speak softly to her in a language that she didn't recognize as he continued to stroke her face. He seemed to be cooing to her the way one might talk to a scared pet or a fussy infant. It brought a small smile to Clarke's face despite her lack of comprehension at that words he was saying.

"I'm s-sorry, I-I don't understand..." she stammered through a startlingly dry mouth and tight throat.

The boy instantly stopped the motion of his hands. He regarded her with wide eyes and immediately jumped up, backing away a couple of steps before turning on his heels and sprinting out the door.

Clarke was instantly confused. What had she done wrong? Why had he looked so alarmed when she'd spoken? And where had he gone?

Most importantly, what the hell was going on?

Still laying on her side, Clarke began to feel the pull of unconsciousness attempting to take her again. She felt a spike of panic course through her at the thought of falling asleep in such a helpless - and defenseless - position, but she soon realized that she was powerless to avoid the pull.

She slowly drifted off into a dreamless state of blackness once again.

This time, she awoke to the sound of hushed voices. They were talking in that language she didn't recognize, and whatever was being said was done in harsh whispering tones.

Blinking slowly, Clarke opened her eyes to bright sunlight streaming in from both the window and the open door. The brightness illuminated two figures standing a couple of feet in front of where her head lay.

One of them she recognized as the boy.

He was turned towards the person next to him, talking exceptionally fast in a hushed whisper as he flailed his hands about. The person he was talking to - a girl, seemingly a couple of years older than he was - had her arms crossed in front of her as she regarded him with pursed lips and a hardened
expression. Her foot was tapping against the floor impatiently as he continued to talk, occasionally motioning towards Clarke as he did so.

The two bore a striking resemblance to one another - Clarke surmised that they must be siblings. The girl was a bit taller than the boy next to her, with a slightly more athletic figure and sharper features to emphasize her age. Her hair was in neat braids that cascaded halfway down her back, tied together at the base of her neck to keep them in place. She wore a sleeveless cloth dress similar to the color and fabric of that of her brother's loin cloth that came down to her knees, and it was tied at her waistline with a bit of rope. Clarke couldn't see her eyes at the moment, but she assumed they would probably be the same hazel as her brother's.

They were exceptionally beautiful children.

Suddenly, the boy fell silent as he noticed his sister turn towards Clarke who had been watching the two of them for a few moments. The boy's face broke into a toothy grin from ear-to-ear and he made to come forward. Before he could even make it one step, though, his sister had the top of his arm firmly in her grasp. His eyes snapped up to hers and she looked down at him in warning. His smile fell immediately as he ducked his head to look at the ground.

Releasing him from her grip, she said something to her brother in their language. He reluctantly nodded, eyes still trained on the floor. She turned away from him and steeled herself forward, facing Clarke once again. She took a couple of cautious steps towards Clarke, her expression hard and her posture tense - almost as if she was prepared to strike Clarke down at the first sign of danger. Which, Clarke thought, judging by the look she was being given, she probably was.

She finally came to tower over the defenseless girl before her. She looked down into Clarke's eyes as if she was searching for something. Clarke did her best to pour as much kindness and innocence into her expression as possible. For some reason, she felt as if she owed these kids her life. She needed them to trust her if she was going to survive.

The girl addressed in her language. Clarke furrowed her brows and shook her head minutely, trying to convey her lack of comprehension.

"I wish I could understand you, but I really can't. I'm sorry," she said quietly. Her mouth and throat were still impossibly dry, but she tried to lace as much genuineness into her words as possible. It came out more like a whispered croak.

The girl immediately widened her eyes. Suddenly, she was crouching down in front of Clarke, hauling her into a sitting position and talking a mile a minute in her language. The strength of the young girl would have impressed Clarke had she not been so rough with her.

Clarke cried out as she was forced back into a sitting position against the wall. The dull ache that she had gotten used to was back to an intense throbbing throughout her entire body. Her vision swam as she tried to focus on something other than the pain.

The boy rushed forward from where he had been standing and shouted angrily at his sister, interrupting what she was saying and pointing to Clarke while he spoke. His sister abruptly turned her head to look at him in her crouch and shouted over him, effectively silencing him. His mouth snapped shut and Clarke noticed his eyes immediately begin to water as he backed away from the two girls again. She was overcome with the desire to wrap him in a hug.

His sister turned her fiery gaze back to Clarke. Her mouth was set in a hard line as she assessed the
shaking girl before her. She appeared to be at a loss of what to say or do.

Clarke knew the feeling.

After what felt like minutes of tense silence, the girl finally rose up from her crouch to stand directly in front of Clarke. She looked into Clarke's eyes and said something in her language that sounded like a command of some sort. Clarke could only nod under the intensity of her gaze.

This seemed to satisfy the girl. She huffed and slowly backed away from Clarke and towards her brother, maintaining heavy eye contact the entire time. Once she had her brother safely behind her, she told him something in their language and shoved him back. Regarding his sister with something close to resentment, the boy clenched his jaw and slowly turned to retreat out the door. Once through it, he looked back at Clarke over his shoulder one last time with what seemed like an apology before he bolted away into the darkness.

The girl stepped into Clarke's line of sight at her brother's retreating figure and matched her gaze with a glare. She continued to back away from Clarke until she was standing in the doorway. Narrowing her eyes at the sitting girl before her, she quickly grabbed ahold of the door from where it rested against the wall by its handle and swung it shut with a decisive bang that seemed to shake the entire cabin.

Clarke's head protested the bang fervently.

Unable to resist the exhaustion overtaking her after the startling confrontation, Clarke closed her eyes.

It was only then that she realized that tears had been streaming down her face the entire time the siblings had been with her.

At the very least, Clarke hoped that all of this sleep was helping her body to heal. Otherwise, the constant fading in-and-out of consciousness would really start to get on her nerves.

She opened her eyes to a warm light bathing the room. From what she could gather, Clarke assumed it had to be getting close to sundown. As disoriented as she was, though, she began to wonder how long she had been in this room, exactly. A couple of days, perhaps? That didn't even include the amount of time she could've spent passed out in the pod after the crash-landing.

The wheels in her mind began to work into overdrive as she contemplated an endless stream of questions: Who had found her? And how? Had the boy and his sister dragged her here somehow? How far away was her crash site? Was there even anything left of the pod for her to salvage?

The questions flew through her mind as she stared out the window. She finally took note of the rich greenery just outside the window. She had missed the couple of vines spilling through the window initially.

The thought of the lively earth re-claiming the land that was so unceremoniously taken and destroyed by humans so many years ago made the corners of her mouth quirk up. It seemed as if this was nature's way of taking back what rightfully belonged to it.

Everything came full circle eventually.

Clarke absently looked down at her feet and was startled by the realization that they were completely
bare. Her shoes had disappeared.

What in the world?

That was it. That was the last straw. She couldn't just sit by and let the days pass along with her consciousness. Clarke needed to get the hell out of this cabin. Regardless of how much pain it caused her, she had to figure out where she was and get some answers - hopefully in the form of supplies from the pod wreckage (if she managed to find it on her own, that is).

Taking a deep breath, Clarke steeled herself and leaned into her left hand resting on the ground. Since her right arm was essentially useless at the moment, she would just have to make due with her weaker arm.

As carefully as can be, Clarke pushed until her butt was slightly off of the ground then bent her left leg up to assist her. Keeping her right leg straight, she slowly inched herself up the wall using her hand as leverage against the panels and her bent leg as her momentum. Ever so slowly, Clarke finally managed to get into a standing position with all of her weight resting on the left side of her body. She kept her right arm cradled into her chest, almost as if it was in an invisible sling. For some reason unbeknownst to Clarke, her body had unconsciously decided against putting any weight on her right leg.

She needed to figure out why.

Cautiously, Clarke lowered her right leg from its hovering position next to her left onto the ground. As soon as she did so, she understood why her body had attempted to protect her.

Putting even the slightest amount of pressure on her right leg caused an immediate jolt of what felt like electricity to course through her foot and up into her hip. Clarke sucked in a strangled breath and bit her lip against the scream threatening to come out. She saw spots.

She grasped onto whatever hold she could find with her left hand and shifted all of her weight back onto her left leg once again, allowing her right to dangle in the air just off the ground with her knee slightly bent. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the wall in the hopes of letting the pain pass. Her heart rate hammered in her chest as residual bolts of electric pain shot through her.

Reeling, Clarke began to assess her injuries full-on.

She knew her right arm was broken. Probably in multiple places. Without a sling of some sort, she would run the risk of it healing improperly and causing her unnecessary misery down the road. Finding something to set her arm had to become one of her top priorities along with finding the pod wreckage.

The pain in her leg, however, was a little bit more difficult to diagnose. It didn't feel like the kind of pain one would associate with broken bones or smashed ligaments. That kind of shooting pain reminded her of when she had pulled her quad muscle as a kid - only ten times more excruciating. The conclusion that this led Clarke to didn't comfort her in the least: she had nerve damage. Based on the route of the pain, she ascertained that she mostly likely had a pinched nerve in her lower back. That kind of injury usually only happened when there was intense compression in the wrong direction on one's legs.

Suddenly, things made a little bit more sense to Clarke. The pod must have landed in a manner that caused her right side to have braced the majority of the impact. Since she had been unconscious upon landing, she was unable to prevent her limbs from being bent and contorted every which way - probably experiencing a ridiculous amount of pressure in all the wrong areas, as well.
That would explain why her injuries seemed to be localized to her right side.

There was good news and bad news in this particular diagnosis: the good news - none of the injuries were life-threatening or permanent. With the right measures taken, Clarke could make a full recovery in a reasonable amount of time. The bad news - Clarke had no means to take any of those measures possible, whatsoever.

Clarke gulped with the realization that she was royally and utterly screwed.

With this realization came a wave of dizziness that emphasized another problem to add to Clarke's ever-growing list: she was famished and dying of thirst.
Her last meal had been a pitiful dinner in her cell the night she had been rudely awakened and delivered to Jaha. Her stomach suddenly bottomed out as her body caught up to her train of thought.

She began to feel exceptionally light-headed and weak with the revelation of how screwed she was. With the last ounces of her strength, Clarke willed herself not to think about anything other than staying on her feet. If she focused on anything else - especially the state of her mind in her current predicament - she might not be able to make it through the night.

She had to fight with every fiber of her being if she was going to stay alive at this point. Regardless of whether or not she, personally, wanted to survive, she had the 98 prisoners to think about. Their fate was in her hands, and if she gave up now she would never be able to forgive herself for causing so much unnecessary death. Not to mention, the lives of the rest of the Arkers hung in the balance right along with them. Their space station only had so much life left in it, and people were already beginning to suffer the side-effects of diminishing resources across the board.

Her only option was to get them all to the ground. She couldn't be responsible for the demise of an entire race of people. She wouldn't be able to bear the weight that would befall her if she was.

If nothing else, Clarke concluded, she needed them to stay alive for her sanity and well-being.

At this point, it was only about staying alive. Only about surviving.

Would there ever be more than that?

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Clarke stood in that position against the wall until there was no longer any sunlight streaming in. Her bare left foot ached with the pressure of keeping her entire body up, her left hand sweaty from holding onto the wall.

Not long after she stood up, Clarke realized that she had no way of getting food or water in her current condition.

Without the ability to put any weight on her right leg, she would have to drag herself through the woods solely on her left foot - which also happened to be bare save for a sock at this point - using only her left hand to scavenge, and she doubted whether she was even strong enough to make it to the other side of the room at this point.
Add on the fact that she had no idea where the hell she was or any way to secure and store food and water once she actually found it, and one could conclude that Clarke Griffin was pretty much done for.
The wave of determination that had coursed through her previously was now gone. In its place was a crippling weakness that threatened to annihilate her where she stood. That, and the overwhelming desire to cry.

Clarke's breath began to come out stuttering as she worked herself up. Her heart rate pounded through her head as she began to tremble. Before she knew it, tears were spilling down her face at an alarming rate.

Sliding back down to the floor with little care for her injuries, Clarke began to sob.

Her mind and body were overwhelmed with waves of pain. Every inch of her was throbbing with a sharp ache.

She started to scream.

This was it. She was done for. If it wasn't the hunger or dehydration that took her, it would surely be her grief.

She finally let it out. Everything she had been holding in since the moment her father had been killed - and probably long before that, as well.
She cried for him, for the memories they shared together and the unconditional love between them - love that would never leave her but was now coupled with an emptiness Clarke knew she would never be rid of.
She cried for her mother, having lost the love of her life right before her eyes and being tasked with keeping her daughter in one piece - a task which had ultimately ended in Clarke being locked in solitary, a notable failure.
She cried for her best friend, the boy she had grown up counting on and laughing with until neither could breath who now had to bear the brunt of Clarke's all-consuming hatred and anger - the person she didn't know whether or not she was ever going to be capable of forgiving.

She cried for the 98 prisoners whose fate rested with her, knowing that she was powerless to save them at this point. She cried for the rest of her people, all the innocents who would ultimately meet an untimely end because she had failed to save them.

She cried for herself. She would never be able to live with the knowledge of what her shortcomings had resulted in.

Surely her soul would be unsalvageable.

Clarke screamed and wailed to the point of suffocation. She was light-headed with the lack of proper oxygen.

She welcomed the blackness this time.

-----------------------------------------

Once again, Clarke woke to the sound of voices.

Something was different, though.

Clarke managed to blink her eyes open despite the crushing weakness overwhelming her body. She
registered that her vision was slightly blurry as she took in the sight outlined in midday sunlight before her.

The siblings were back. Both children wore the same clothes (if you could even call them that) Clarke had originally seen them in. The difference Clarke had noted, though, came in the form of a third person.

A man.

He was tall, broad-shouldered, and, despite the layers of clothing covering his frame, Clarke could tell that he was heavily-built with muscle. He wore dark and tattered clothing that clung tightly to his imposing figure. Straps that criss-crossed his chest and over his torso met behind his back to hold up a sheath - a sheath which housed a very large and intimidating sword that Clarke could only see the handle of. He wore grey arm protectors that started as fingerless gloves on his hand and ran halfway up his arms, leaving only the skin around his elbows visible. His feet were hidden in sturdy-looking boots.

Everywhere Clarke looked on his body, there were places to hold a variety of weapons she couldn't even begin to comprehend.

The thing that stood out the most to her, though, was his face.

His skin was quite a few shades lighter than the siblings', but still rich in its dark complexity. His head was bald save a strip of dark hair cropped to the point of barely being visible that ran down the center of his scalp. It was precisely shaven, just as his barely-there stubble was across his chiseled jaw. Dark eyes were set alight in his chiseled features and shone down at her.

He was a glorious - and terrifying - sight to behold. Clearly a warrior of some sort if Clarke had ever seen one before.

Bringing her out of her revery, the warrior took a couple steps forward to crouch in front of her, his boots thumping against the concrete as he walked.

The siblings had been talking at him in hushed yet strangely-excited voices when she had woken up. As soon as he noticed Clarke coming to, he had given them a silencing look and come forward, leaving them to stare after him as he approached.

Absently, Clarke noted that the young girl had Clarke's inadequate shoes cradled in her arms. That explains where they went, Clarke thought.

The warrior sat back on his haunches before her. He appraised her figure up and down at a bone-chillingly slow pace. His expression was completely unreadable, eyes hardened. As his intense gaze met hers, he voiced a question in the same language she had heard the siblings speaking in.

Once again, Clarke was left shaking her head in confusion.

"Like I told those kids before, I can't understand you. I'm sorry," she pursed her lips and her eyebrows furrowed.

Were her eyes playing tricks on her or did she just see a flash of comprehension light his eyes? Though his expression remained blank and unreadable, Clarke thought she saw his eyes widen minutely in surprise and, potentially, understanding.

This was her chance, Clarke thought. If there was even the slightest of possibilities that he could understand what she was saying, she owed it to herself to try and communicate her needs to him.
She had to try.

"Please," she begged, taking on a tone of total desperation, "I'm badly injured and starving. I haven't had anything to eat or drink in god-knows how long, and I'm too weak to find anything for myself. If there's even the smallest chance that you can understand me, I'm begging you -," she put every ounce of feeling she had into this last whisper,

"Please. Help me."

She felt tears began to prickle behind her eyes. Instead of trying to hold them in or keep them from running, though, she let them fall down her face in streams. If she appeared as pathetic and weak as possible - the furthest thing from a threat to him - that might increase the chances of him helping her, right?

He furrowed his brow in the wake of her plea. Clarke was almost certain he understood her at this point.

Suddenly, he turned his head to the kids standing behind him and began barking what sounded like a bunch of orders at them.

When he finished, both kids regarded him with confusion shining in their widened eyes. Upon seeing their reaction - or lack thereof - he barked another swift command even louder at them, startling the two from their stunned silence. Almost immediately, both kids sprung to action, turning swiftly on their heels and sprinting out the open door into the forest beyond.

Utterly confused, Clarke watched them retreat into the trees for a moment before focusing her gaze back to the warrior still crouched in front of her. He had been watching the two retreat over his shoulder, as well, and he abruptly turned back to face Clarke the moment they disappeared into the dense canopy.

"Who are you?" the warrior questioned in perfect English. His voice was low and quiet as he regarded her.

Clarke was stunned.

Her heart rate sped up instantly as her blood ran slightly cold. If she hadn't been light-headed before, she most certainly was now.

The last thing she had expected was for him to speak English. She had hoped that he understood her pleading, sure, but never in a million years would she have expected him to respond in such a way.

This changed everything.

She schooled her shocked expression and forced the words caught in her throat to come out.

"Y-you speak English? How - ?" she stammered gracelessly, shaking her head, mind reeling. She allowed a moment to collect herself as he continued to stare at her. "You understood everything I said, then?"

He simply nodded, expression blank, encouraging her to continue. Waiting for his question to be answered.

"My name is Clarke Griffin," she said, a little more confidently this time. "And you? What's your name?" she prompted him softly.

She hoped she wasn't overstepping any boundaries she didn't know existed. She felt as if she was walking on eggshells, simply waiting for the other shoe to drop and for him to slice her throat open with that huge sword of his.
He stayed silent for a moment, appraising her again. His brow furrowed even more but his eyes had lost some of the hardness she had initially seen in them. Had she not been completely terrified of him and what she figured him to be capable of, she might've been able to process the subtle kindness shining somewhere in the depths of his dark irises.

As it were, though, she was too concerned with not dying to notice it in that moment.

Seeming to find what he wanted in her gaze, he nodded his head minutely.

"I am Lincoln Kom Trikru," he spoke in a steady voice. Strangely enough, Clarke found herself being comforted by his tone and demeanor.

"Kom...Tri-kru?" Clarke questioned, totally butchering the pronunciation and looking perplexed. "That's an interesting last name," she mused quietly to herself.

He heard her, though, and she swore she saw the corners of his mouth twitch minimally before he schooled his expression back to one of calm stoicism.

"It is not. Trikru is the name of my clan of origin. My home," he said proudly. She noticed his posture straighten further as he spoke. "I believe it is safe to say you are not from any clan I would know." He quirked an eyebrow at her in question, waiting.

How was she supposed to respond to that?

Of course she wasn't from a clan! She didn't even know there were any clans to be a part of in the first place...
Once again, this changed everything she thought she knew about the ground. Not only was it inhabitable, but apparently people had been living on it long enough to form these so-called "clans" comprised of said people. People who, if they were anything like Lincoln, most likely knew how to fight, hunt and survive on this planet better than Clarke could ever dream of doing.

She was most definitely in over her head.

"I...no. Probably not," she finished lamely, looking down at where her hands rested in her lap. She didn't know what else to say. How was she supposed to tell him the truth? More importantly, how was he going to respond to this truth?

"You come from the sky."

Her head instantly snapped back up, eyes locking on his. She had not been expecting that. She searched for anything in his expression that would clue her in as to what he was thinking. He had spoken so calmly, sounding every bit as confident as he had when he spoke of his own clan. There was nothing accusatory in his gaze, nothing to make Clarke suspect he was going to lash out at her. She only found what appeared to be genuine curiosity.

How odd.

"I...h-how? How do you know that?" She questioned quietly. She wasn't sure why she was speaking in such hushed tones.

This time, she was sure he was fighting a smile from forming on his face.
Lincoln rocked back on his heels a little bit, intertwining his hands together from where they hung off his knees in front of him.
"Belou and Zenya, the two who found you, fetched me from our village this morning. They spoke of a skai prisa who had fallen from the sky in some sort of metal cage." He bit back a chuckle at this, eyes light. "Knowing that it was unlikely I would believe them, they brought your shoes to me as proof of your arrival. They told me that you were unwell and asked for my help."

It was Clarke's turn to furrow her brows.

So the two kids had been the ones to find her crash site. They must've dragged her to this cabin from the wreckage together. She shuddered at the thought of her injured and unconscious form being dragged carelessly through the woods for an extended period of time. No wonder she had woken up so sore on top of everything else.

"Why would they come to you?" Clarke asked innocently. "Are you a healer?"

Lincoln shook his head.
"No. But I am familiar enough with the practices of one." He shrugged. "I believe it had more to do with their trust in me. I have looked after them for many years."

Clarke was surprised by this.
"They're...yours?" she asked, confused. He definitely didn't look old enough to have kids of any age, let alone ones as old as Belou and Zenya.

Lincoln actually chuckled at this. It was a short sound, deep in the back of his throat, but pleasant nonetheless. Clarke smiled a little.

"Not mine. They are orphans. Our entire village looks after them, raises them, keeps them safe." His eyes took on a sheen of protectiveness at this. Clarke nodded in understanding.

"Belou seems to have taken a liking to you, Clarke Griffin of the Sky."

She smiled at this.

"He seems like a sweet boy. His sister, on the other hand..." she trailed off. Lincoln nodded his head, pursing his lips.

"She is not as trusting as her brother. She does not know what to make of you." He paused for a moment, considering.
"Nor do I."

Clarke swallowed, suddenly anxious again. She needed Lincoln to trust her. It was crucial to her survival. She had to make sure he knew she wasn't a threat.

"Please, I-I don't want to hurt anyone. I just..." she trailed off, not sure how much of her dire situation she wanted to explain to him at the moment. She would start with the most pressing matter. "I need food. Water. I won't even ask you to help with my injuries right now, but I-I... don't think I'll be able to make it through the night without something."

Clarke's throat was incredibly tight now. She didn't think she had ever been so desperate.

Lincoln seemed to see this. He began to war with something deep within himself as he hovered over her. His eyes flashed countless emotions through them before they finally settled back into a look of determination. With a nod, he allowed his features to be overtaken by this quiet determination as he rose to his feet.
Without a word, he turned away from her and jogged out of the house.

Clarke was stunned for a moment.

"Lincoln!" she yelled after him desperately. "Lincoln, please! Come back!" Her voice cracked. She felt her eyes begin to well up again.

Why had he left her? Had her pleading not been convincing enough?

Her head hung in a look of utter defeat. She closed her eyes to the tears now flowing freely from them. How pathetically weak she had become, allowing herself to begin to trust her life to a complete stranger - a hardened warrior, no less. She never should've stooped so low as to beg for anything from him. Whatever ill fate befell her now was surely going to be exactly what she deserved.

Clarke once again succumbed to the fact that she was ultimately doomed. The thought brought her a strange amount of comfort, she realized.

It would be nice not to feel like the weight of the world was on her shoulders for once. Even before she had been tasked with this mission, she had, for some reason, felt an undeniable sense of responsibility to her people and their wellbeing. Since she was one of the few who knew of the Ark's impending shutdown, she felt it was her responsibility to figure out a way to save them all somehow. The weight of that feeling had exhausted her beyond anything she had ever known.

And she was just so tired.
We Are The Same

Chapter Notes

Because Clarke and Lincoln are the brotp that always should've been...

I loved writing the interactions between the two of them. I always figured them to have somewhat similar ideals in the show - at least to begin with. Both are too thoughtful and intelligent not to see somewhat eye-to-eye when it comes to the bigger picture, I think.

Another familiar face shows up (though not as friendly as the last...)

Thank you SO MUCH for the comments and kudos so far!! It's so encouraging to know you're enjoying the plot so far in these first couple of chapters!!

Hopefully you'll stick with it, cuz it's just getting started...(;

**Also, NOTE: I edited the bit about the wristband out of the last chapter for anyone who read it soon after it was posted. You'll find out why in this chapter...**

She was startled awake by a gentle hand on her shoulder. Her head snapped up as she blinked her eyes wide open, immediately tensing away from the unfamiliar touch. She had never felt weaker and more hopeless than she did in this moment.

With a thud of her heart, she recognized Lincoln crouching before her, body framed in moonlight streaming in from the open door and window. His hand rested on her shoulder as he eyed her with muted concern.

"Lincoln...?" She couldn't believe he had come back. She was instantly embarrassed that she had doubted him so easily, her cheeks flushing red. She was grateful for the shadows that hid her face against the cabin wall.

He nodded at her, removing his hand from her shoulder and reaching down into the satchel bag hanging from his. Clarke followed his movements weakly. Although she had just woken from a rest, she still felt herself teetering on the edge of consciousness. She recognized this as her body's way of conserving energy.

Before it shut down for good, that is.

Lincoln brought several items out of the bag one at a time and placed them on the floor beside Clarke's extended legs. Everything was wrapped in some sort of parchment - perhaps in the attempt to keep the food fresh?
Lastly, he brought out what appeared to be some sort of leather skin. He brought it up to her lips, an encouraging look in his eyes.

"Drink, *skai prisa*. It will help."

Without question, Clarke nodded her consent and he pressed the opening of the skin to her mouth. She parted her lips slightly as he tilted the skin up a little, allowing for the cool liquid to pour into her mouth carefully. She moaned involuntarily as the fresh water glided down her throat.

It was the best thing she'd ever tasted.

"Slowly. You do not want your body to go into shock," Lincoln warned, tilting the skin back down to halt the flow of liquid. Clarke nearly protested even though she knew he was right. She needed to pace herself.

After a few moments, she nodded to him again and he tilted the skin back up.

They continued with this pattern for a few minutes in silence. Although her stomach now felt slightly sloshy with the amount of water filling it, Clarke didn't feel like she would ever quench her thirst. She told herself she would have to allow for her body to process the welcomed nutrients in time. Slowly but surely, her thirst would die down.

Now for her hunger.

When Lincoln lowered the pouch away from her face, Clarke immediately stared down at the little packages sitting beside her right leg. Her eyes darted to each one quickly, mouth now filling with saliva in anticipation of a meal. Lincoln noticed her gaze and placed the skin at his feet, reaching to pick up the package closest to him. He slowly unwrapped it and held it out to Clarke.

"Bread. Still fresh. It should coat your stomach nicely." He broke off a piece for her. Clarke didn't think she had ever seen something so glorious. These people could make bread? What else could they do? The possibilities were now beginning to seem endless.

She could get used to life on the ground if it included a fresh loaf of bread everyday, that's for sure.

She took the piece of bread from him in a burst of energy and bit down savagely, not caring how she appeared to Lincoln. She had to remind herself to chew the entire thing slowly so as not to choke.
Lincoln eyed her with a raised brow, amusement dancing in his eyes and a smirk on his face.

She finished the piece quicker than she probably should have, eyeing the rest of the loaf hungrily. She silently begged him for more. He obliged, breaking off another small piece and handing it to her.

They continued like this until the entire loaf was finished. Clarke had tried to pace herself but she knew her hunger was nowhere close to being satiated. Lincoln seemed to know this as well, picking up the next package and unwrapping it, breaking off a piece of what appeared to be some kind of meat and handing it to her.

For what felt like over an hour, Lincoln and Clarke continued this way until all of the food had been consumed. He had supplemented her eating breaks with sips from the water skin, and Clarke was immensely grateful for his care.

She found that she felt quite safe with Lincoln. She was comforted by his calm demeanor and his kind eyes, his words of assurance and careful movements. She could already see why Belou and Zenya had trusted him to help her.

Clarke wished she could thank them for bringing Lincoln to her. He was a godsend.

After awhile, Clarke began to grow quite tired, feeling both quenched and full for the first time in many days. The feeling was overwhelming, and she had to fight to keep her eyelids from drooping shut in contentment as Lincoln gathered the empty wrappings up.

He slowly rose to his feet before her.

"I will be back tomorrow with more supplies, Clarke of the Sky. Reshop."

Although she had no idea what the word meant, Clarke found comfort in the poetic lilt of the statement. She nodded towards him in thanks, smiling sweetly up at him as he backed towards the door.

He returned her gaze with a curt nod, his soft expression bathed in the moonlight.

Without another word, Lincoln backed out of the cabin and shut the door behind him.

Clarke stared at the closed door before her for a few moments.

For the first time in days, she felt something close to quiet contentment.
She slowly drifted off into a blissful state of dreamlessness, closing her eyes finally with a sigh.

She finally had reason to hope again.

------------------------------------------

Lincoln and Clarke fell into what one might call a routine for the next few days.

Lincoln came around twice a day - once in the morning and once at sundown.

He brought her ample food and water, as well as a cloth sling for her broken arm and a salve to clean the cuts that lined her face and hands.

Although she had determined her shoulder wasn't dislocated, she still worried about the state of her arm if she was unable to get some sort of cast in place to set her broken bones. She made due with the sling, though, exceptionally grateful to Lincoln for bringing it. He also brought her some sort of syrupy cocktail he claimed would help with the pain in her leg. She didn't question the ingredients after the first day, feeling like it might make her seem rude or untrusting.

Besides, it seemed to work well enough. After emptying the contents of the syrup cup a couple of times during their second encounter, Clarke felt the sharp pain coursing through her lower body begin to subside to a dull ache. She was able to move her leg a bit more without as much resistance, too.

Clarke welcomed any help she could get at this point.

She learned quickly that Lincoln wasn't much of a talker. The longest conversation thus far had been during their first encounter and, although Clarke was incredibly curious to learn more about the warrior and his people, she didn't press him. She figured he would be more forthcoming as soon as he felt like he had reason to trust her. She sensed that they weren't quite at that point yet. She knew it would take time.

To be honest, Clarke was grateful for his lack of prying and questioning. It seemed like there was a silent agreement between them that the less information they divulged to each other, the safer they'd be if they were ever found out.
Besides, she wasn't so sure she was ready to answer any questions he might have.

Thinking of her situation or the events that led her here was still too painful.

In between his visits, Clarke would usually just sleep. She had nothing better to do, really.

She had memorized every detail of the one-room log cabin that had become her home.

The pattern the leaves and branches would make on the floor every time a breeze blew through the window or the door was opened. The way the sunlight would stream through the broken window pane at high noon. The way the cracks in the concrete seemed to grow wider the longer Clarke stared at them. Hell, she even figured she could probably estimate the width and length of the wooden panels lining the walls and ceiling if someone asked her to.

She had also memorized Lincoln.

She wasn't attracted to him, no, but he certainly wasn't hard to look at - a welcome sight that she could count on everyday.

His presence comforted her almost like Wells's used to when they were growing up. Though he didn't say much, there was something about the way he carried himself that gave Clarke a sense of safety and peace. Perhaps it was the quiet stoicism that always colored his features. Or maybe the gentle motions he would fall into whilst caring for her.

Although she had only met him a few days ago, she already felt like she could trust him completely - even if it wasn't yet reciprocated. It wasn't like she knew anything about him, that's for sure. But there was something about the way he went about doing things that gave her reason to believe that he would never try to harm her. He was a truly kind soul, and this shown through in every gentle action he took towards Clarke.

It was baffling and wonderful all at the same time.

Especially considering that he looked to be capable of everything but gentleness.

Every time he came to visit, he wore roughly the same garb she had seen him in on the first day. Maybe a couple minor changes here and there, but still. She had been exceptionally intimidated by him upon first encounter and, had he not taken so much care with her, she knew she would still feel the same bone-chilling response to his figure that she had then.
She began to wonder if he was required to maintain a certain appearance as a warrior. She figured that was probably the case judging by the other consistencies in his demeanor.

Again, she wished she knew more about his culture. It was eating at her not being able to know much about her savior and his people. Not only did she want the information for herself - to satisfy her somewhat insatiable need for knowledge, in general - but she also needed it for the sake of her people's wellbeing.

They had to know what kind of situation they were walking into, regardless of how desperate they were to get there. She couldn't very well let them wander into a trap, could she? Or start a pointless war out of fear or desire to take what wasn't theirs in the first place.

No, she most certainly couldn't let that happen.

As she thought of her people and their situation, she suddenly recalled something Jaha had said to her before throwing her in the pod.

Something about a bracelet she would be wearing that her mother could use to monitor her vitals.

She glanced down at her wrists. No bracelet. For the first time, though, she did notice a couple of minuscule red marks on her right wrist - almost like puncture wounds. She furrowed her brows at this.

She had been wearing the bracelet, apparently. So where was it, then? Had it somehow been ripped off her wrist upon landing? It had been on her right hand, after all, which was the side that had been crushed upon impact. Perhaps it had been removed then? She was still extremely skeptical.

A startling thought suddenly crossed her mind then.

If the bracelet had been ripped out when she landed, that meant that her vital signs hadn't registered on the space station since she got to Earth. That meant that to the systems on the Ark, it probably seemed like her stats had crashed the moment the pod landed.

They probably thought she was dead.
Panic suddenly coursed through Clarke, fierce and all-consuming. She was frozen, staring down at her hands bathed in mid-afternoon light.

If they thought she was dead, what did that mean for the prisoners? Had they all already been killed? And what about her mother? She probably believed that she was without family now, having lost both her husband and daughter in the span of a few months. She must be suffering...

Clarke shook her head, attempting to halt her train of thought. She wouldn't allow herself to dwell on her mother's potential despair. She couldn't.

She had to believe that the Ark knew she made it somehow. She had to believe they were simply waiting for her to radio in and give them the "ok" to bring them all to the ground.

She had two months, right? There was still time.

She focused on slowing her breathing. She needed to focus.

She needed to get to that pod wreckage.

She would ask Lincoln to take her there first thing tomorrow morning. He would help her. He had been nothing but generous with her since their first interaction, and she had to believe that he would be able to grant her this favor.

As she'd already established, he hadn't seemed too interested in her back story up until this point. He hadn't even asked why she came down to Earth in the first place.

That would've been the first question that came to mind if she had been the one to come across a random person who just happened to fall from the sky - but, hey, maybe that was just her.

Besides, all she wanted to do was radio up to her people to let them know she made it. What reason would he have not to trust her now?

It's not like she was going to harm him either way.

Her people, on the other hand...

This gave her pause.
They were the biggest wildcard in this scenario. In all honesty, she had no idea what they were planning to do once she radioed up to them and told her that the ground was inhabitable. Would they bring the Ark down immediately? Was it even possible to do so?

Clarke realized she didn't know. She also didn't know why they'd given her two months to complete said "mission" of bringing their people down to the ground. Why such a long period of time? Things were getting pretty desperate on the space station - desperate enough to send a random teenage girl to the ground on her own - so why had they given her such a huge window?

Perhaps they had been accounting for obstacles. Obstacles like the current predicament she found herself in at the moment. That seemed to be the only explanation Clarke could think up at this point.

But, seriously, what would they do? They lived an exceptionally strict and militant lifestyle on the Ark, trained to follow every law to the "t," constantly threatened by the ever-present shadow of death or imprisonment looming over their heads. It would be difficult for them to adjust to a life in which that kind of action wasn't necessary. Perhaps it still would be - Clarke didn't know a damn thing about the culture of the ground - but, at the very least, they wouldn't have to compete for such scarce resources on Earth.

Or at least she hoped not.

She had to believe that her people would acclimate to life on the ground in the least-violent manner possible. They would have to respect the people already living here, uphold their culture in the best way possible. They had to.

That would be the only way Clarke could reconcile giving them the "ok" to bring them to the ground. Otherwise, she was simply acting as the catalyst for an all-out war.

That could not happen.

Clarke wouldn't allow it.

That being the case, she would have to approach her contact with the Ark much more cautiously than she'd originally thought. She needed to figure out a way to make them understand the importance of respecting the Grounders. (Clarke didn't know if she liked the name - it was only slightly more reasonable than "the people from the ground with the culture she didn't understand.")

They were all just people, after all. People with different backgrounds and ideas about what was right and wrong, she presumed. But still, just people.
It was all about perspective.

By the time Lincoln showed up later on in the day, Clarke had decided that the best way to get him to take her to the pod wreckage would simply be to ask him outright. No reason to be roundabout with it.

She wanted him to trust her, after all.

He walked through the door with the satchel over his usual warrior get-up, his figure bathed in the soft evening sunlight. When their eyes locked, he gave her a curt nod before shutting the door behind him. He took the few steps to stand in front of her sprawled figure and sat down before her, legs crossed in front of him. Without preamble, he started removing the packages and water skin from the bag one-by-one.

"Lincoln, wait," she said softly, her left hand extended before her a little, "I have a...small favor I'd like to ask of you, if it's alright." She looked at him expectantly, trying to pour as much innocence into her expression as possible.

He stopped what he was doing, narrowing his eyes at her. His face remained stoic as he finished placing the items before her.

His eyes still narrowed, he spoke: "I am not sure if I can agree to help you before I know what it is you ask of me." His voice was quiet, wary. She nodded quickly.

"Right, yes, of course. I wouldn't expect you to." She smiled at him sweetly, hoping to placate him a little. She couldn't tell if it was working or not.

"I...I would like to see the site where my pod crashed. There should be some supplies waiting in there for me, and I think I'd like a change of clothes," she joked half-heartedly. He said nothing, stoic as ever as he waited for her to continue.

"My people...they need to know I'm alright, Lincoln. They're waiting on me to radio back to them." She swallowed, slightly nervous now. "There's a lot more at stake here than just my life. I'm sure you probably figured that out."

Lincoln said nothing. His eyes were still narrowed as he allowed her words to sink in. His expression
now looked more conflicted than anything else.

"And what happens when you let them know you are alive?" he questioned, curiosity lighting his conflicted features. "What will they do?"

Clarke wished she could give him an honest answer.

Well, she could, but it would probably be the least-reassuring thing she could say to him now.

Because the truth was, she genuinely didn't know. How could she? Her people were predictable in terms of logistics - such as how much rations were given to each person, how many children they were allowed to have, the times that were set for curfew, etc. - but she couldn't even begin to guess how they would react in this scenario. She didn't have enough information to give them about the Grounders, and she could only assume that Jaha and the council would be exceptionally resistant to being lectured about maintaining peace with a group of people they knew nothing about.

She owed Lincoln as close to an honest answer as possible, though. After all the help he'd given her, she owed it to him to make a fully-informed decision - especially given the fact that he wasn't obligated to help her at all, whatsoever.

Besides, he would probably be able to tell if she was lying.

She cleared her throat, "To be honest, I'm not completely sure. They're desperate though, that much I know," she told him softly. "All we want is to be able to live on the ground in peace."

Lincoln cut his eyes to the floor abruptly, shaking his head as if in disappointment.

"We would all like peace, skai prisa. It is much easier spoken of than attained, though." His head hung before him, his voice slightly muffled. He spoke with so much regret that it made Clarke's heart pang.

What had these people been through? Was Clarke dooming her people to live a life of heartache and strife if she chose to bring them to the ground?

Was it really any different from the Ark?
"Lincoln, please," Clarke begged, reaching out and placing her hand gently over his arm where it rested on his leg. His eyes instantly snapped to her hand.

"They're doomed if I don't help them. They might not all be good, but there are too many innocent people up there for me to just let them die. Please understand." She implored him to look at her, silently pleading with him to really hear what she was saying.

He met her eyes slowly. His lips were pursed as he seemed to be contemplating something.

It must've been minutes before he spoke again.

"I will take you to your ship, Clarke of the Sky," he stated firmly, straightening his posture as he did so. "But only to gather supplies. You will have to speak with the Commander before you contact your people. Only after permission from her will you be allowed to 'radio' them, as you say. I will not be responsible for bringing my people into another senseless war simply to grant a favor. The stakes are just as high for all of us, and I will not betray my people - nor my Commander, for that matter."

Clarke was speechless for a moment.

While she understood his reasoning and was grateful for his response, she had questions.

First off, who the hell was this "Commander" he spoke of? Did she command the army he was apart of? Did she answer to some sort of council like the one in place on the Ark? She assumed the Grounders would have a leader of some sort - maybe even more than one - but he hadn't mentioned anything until now.

Another alternative: perhaps this so-called Commander was the equivalent of a Chancellor.

 Hopefully she was a little more reasonable than Jaha. It didn't take much for that to be the case.

"I...what would I say to her? Why would she even give me the time of day?" she asked, floundering a little.

"It is in our people's best interest for her to do so," Lincoln explained, seemingly attempting to convince himself just as much as Clarke. "You and your people present a threat to our way of life.
Your technology and weapons most likely surpass ours in more ways than one. We cannot afford to have you as an enemy at this point.” He said the last part more to himself than Clarke. She tilted her head a little, curious.

He seemed to shake himself out of his revery.

"I will ask her for an audience on your behalf. She will see me,” he assured her, nodding.

"How can you be so sure?” Clarke asked, genuinely curious.

"We grew up together," he said simply.

Clarke nodded at this, chewing on her bottom lip a little. She ached to inquire after more details, but figured now was not the time.

"Alright. I'll do it," she said, eyes locked with his. He smiled the slightest bit, inclining his head towards her.

They fell into a comfortable silence.

"So when do we leave for my pod?” she asked after a beat. He rose to his feet slowly, looking down at her.

"Now,” he said firmly, hands intertwining in front of him. "Eat quickly and then we will go."

-----------------------------------------

Clarke didn’t think she had ever seen anything so beautiful.

The forest seemed to glow around her in the remaining rays of sunlight. She was surrounded by green.
It was quickly becoming her favorite color.

Everywhere she looked, she found something different to memorize. Whether it was groupings of trees teeming with life or patches of flowers sprinkling the earth here and there, Clarke thought she had never been more entranced by anything in her entire life. It was the most blissful sensory overload she had ever experienced.

She should've dragged herself out of the cabin sooner.

Lincoln had her cradled in his arms bridal-style, her right side pressed against his chest. It was less jarring for her that way.

They had been walking through the forest for some time now, and Clarke couldn't help the constant movement of her eyes as they consumed the scenery. It was so much more than she could've ever imagined.

As they'd left the cabin, Clarke had noticed that it looked roughly like she expected it too from the outside, made completely of thick logs and meeting in a triangular roof at the top. There was no porch or anything like that. Just a random house dropped into the middle of the woods on its own.

Her attention had been taken away from the house the minute they'd steeped outside, though.

Ahead of her - all around her, really - were trees of every shape and size. They loomed before her, large and intimidating, in a beautiful array of varying greens and browns.

There wasn't a path or anything of the sort leading up to the cabin, and Clarke supposed that had been intentional on the builder's part. Seclusion had most likely been the aim.

The earth was littered with leaves and branches of various lengths all over the place, flowers sitting at the bases of trees here and there.

There was a chorus of sounds filling the air - intermingling sounds of insects, birds, and a number of other creatures going about their business.

It was a peaceful sound, Clarke thought.
Lincoln was silent as they walked through the trees. Everything from his footfalls to his breathing was completely null of sound. Clarke was exceptionally impressed.

She couldn't tell where they were. It looked like they had been walking past the same trees over and over again, and Clarke is now certain she would've been lost beyond belief without Lincoln.

She tilted her head back to gaze at the last streams of sunlight breaking through the canopy of green above them.

"We're not going in circles, are we?" she asked looking up at him, breaking the silence for the first time. He kept his eyes trained on the forest before him, but Clarke saw the corners of his mouth twitch a little.

"No, Clarke, we are not," he answered calmly, still not looking at her. She narrowed her eyes a bit.

"How can you be so sure?" she pressed. "I could've sworn we passed that tree a few minutes ago." He broke into a lopsided smirk at that.

"To a Sky Girl, I am sure all nature must look the same," he mused quietly. "But I have known these woods all my life. Every tree has a story, every flower a scent. One must only train themselves to be able to detect such things."

Clarke snorted.

"Okay, Sensei. Whatever you say," she grinned, rolling her eyes. Lincoln met her eyes now, raising an eyebrow at her.

"What is this 'Sensei' you speak of?" he asked, narrowing his eyes a little, his tone jokingly challenging. Clarke continued to grin at him.

"'Senseis' were said to be very wise men for their time. Usually pretty in touch with their surroundings, maybe even masters of a bunch of stuff. You should be flattered," she told him, matching his eyebrow raise with one of her own.
It was his turn to snort.

He shook his head a little as he turned his eyes back to the forest in front of him.

"If you say so, Sky Girl."

They fell back into a comfortable silence as they continued through the forest. It was not long until they were engulfed in the gorgeous glow of moonlight.

Clarke closed her eyes, basking in the comfort of Lincoln's steady footfalls and the plethora of sounds around them. She felt truly at peace for the first time in a long while, and her chest warmed at the feeling.

She felt more at home after a couple of days on this planet than she had for all her time on the Ark. Despite not knowing a thing about her surroundings or the people who occupied them, she felt her body settle into a state of contentment at the thought of potentially being able to explore the land in time. Her spirit ached at the thought of such freedom.

It was what she had been longing for since she was a child.

A little while later after a significant amount of time spent trekking through the forest, Clarke was broken out of her revery at the sound of rushing water.

That's what she thought it was, at least - she'd only ever heard something like it in the old films she used to watch.

Lincoln had stopped walking suddenly.

She blinked her eyes open slowly, adjusting to the moonlight and taking in her surroundings.

She had been right.

Lincoln was standing on the edge of the forest, a small dirt incline at their feet leading down to a
sloping area covered in rocks of all different shapes and sizes. The rocky area met a rushing river a few yards from where they were, a similar incline leading up to the tree line on the other side of the water.

Scanning the area, Clarke looked for the reason they had stopped. Her eyes widened when they landed on what she was looking for.

Her pod.

A good few yards up the river to the right was what remained of the wreckage. Clarke couldn't make out any specific details of the site in the moonlight from this distance, but she could tell it definitely wasn't shaped like any pod she had ever seen. It had definitely taken a hit upon landing.

Clarke still didn't know how she had survived.

She got her answer as Lincoln descended the dirt slope, crunching over rocks as they worked their way over to the pod.

Draped over the pod's hull and strewn behind and around the wreckage was a large parachute. It must have deployed automatically as the system detected the ground fast-approaching.

How the damn thing had managed to avoid landing in the water she really didn't know. She was merely grateful for whatever divine intervention/technology had saved her life.

Pieces of scrap metal and glass were all over the place in the area around the pod. She saw what looked like very important parts broken off near the hull of the pod, itself, bent unnaturally in various directions.

Lincoln stepped onto the parachute and treaded carefully the closer he got to the pod. His footfalls were almost hesitant at this point. Clarke looked up at his clenched jawline.

"Lincoln, I think it would be best if you put me down. It'll probably be easier to get the supplies without me in your arms," she told him softly.

He stopped walking and eyed her for a moment before nodding.
Turning on his heels, he stepped back off the parachute and walked her over to an area devoid of scrap metal and glass a little closer to the river's edge. He bent and set her down gently, adjusting her position so that she was parallel to the river with the pod wreckage in her right periphery. He looked down at her with his hands resting on his hips.

"What should I be looking for?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Anything you can find. I guess," she shrugged with her good shoulder. "I was a little too busy hurtling towards the ground to notice where they put the packages." She quirked the corner of her mouth up. He did the same, nodding once and turning away from her.

She suddenly remembered something.

"Wait! There is something a little more specific you can be looking for..." She trailed off, worrying her bottom lip. He faced her again, waiting.

"Look for a metal...cuff, of sorts. It isn't too big - just big enough to fit around my wrist - but it's really important that I find out what happened to it."

She hoped her vague explanation was good enough for him.

Silence enveloped them for a moment, and Clarke began to think he was going to question her.

But, just like every other time, he remained silent. He simply nodded, mouth tightening into a hard line.

He stepped back onto the parachute and made his way to the pod more quickly now with exceptional grace. Clarke watched him, still incredibly impressed by his nearly soundless footfalls on so much loose ground.

He moved the parachute away from the opening on the side of the pod. Clarke could've sworn there had been a door there, but she supposed she shouldn't have been surprised that it had been detached somehow. He leaned into the pod, half of his body disappearing into the wrecked contraption.

She heard him rummaging around inside of it.
"I do not see anything of use. A lot of broken glass and parts, but no supplies," he called from inside the pod, voice muffled.

"No metal cuff, either." Clarke furrowed her brows.

"You're sure? It has to be there somewhere..." Clarke's mind began to wander, thinking up endless scenarios about the fate of her wristband.

"I am sure," Lincoln said firmly, snapping her back to attention. "No cuff. Your supplies do not seem to be here either..."

"Try looking beneath the seat. There might be some kind of hidden compartment in the floor." She craned her neck to try to see what he was doing. He seemed to be following her instructions as she heard more shuffling coming from the pod. It stopped abruptly.

"I think I see something," he called, a brief thump resounding around them. He rummaged for a moment more before emerging from the pod, a full backpack in one hand and a first aid kit in the other.

Clarke broke into an exuberant smile.

"Yes! That's it!" she exclaimed happily, motioning for him to bring the items over.

He nodded and obliged, coming to stand over her before dropping into a crouch beside her, placing the items carefully in her lap. He looked to her expectantly, eyes alight with curiosity in an otherwise stoic expression.

Clarke quickly unzipped the largest compartment of the backpack and tears immediately sprung to her eyes.

The first thing she saw was a neatly-folded change of clothes. They were exactly the same as the ones she was currently wearing: a military-grade navy blue jacket with a patch on the arm, a grey long-sleeve shirt, and a pair of khaki pants that matched the color of the jacket. Beneath the clothes was a change of undergarments, which Clarke was exceptionally thankful for.

Beneath the clothes were multiple packages of what her father used to call "astronaut food" -
essentially any food item that was devoid of moisture of any sort - along with a couple bottles of water. Eight days worth, she recalled.

What made the tears threaten to spill over, though, was the sketchbook and pencil set behind the rations.

This is what Jaha had meant about her finding the supplies "to her liking."

What a welcome sight they were.

Moving around to the smaller compartments, Clarke took inventory of the rest of her supplies: a multi-purpose pocket knife, a larger hunting knife, a solar-powered flashlight, two flares, a couple boxes of matches, a bottle of painkillers, penicillin, an epi-pen, and some feminine products (albeit unnecessary due to the implant that had halted her cycle years ago).

Coupled with the first aid kit, Clarke was ultimately pretty satisfied with what she had been given.

(No replacement pair of shoes though, damnit.)

It was certainly more than she'd ever been given at any one time on the Ark, that was for sure.

Lincoln silently took stock of all of her supplies, eyes lingering on the hunting knife in the front pocket. He tilted his head slightly.

"Would you mind if I took a look at that?" he asked her, pointing at the knife. Clarke shook her head.

He nodded once, removing the knife from the bag and grasping it by the handle. He turned it over a couple times in his hands, appraising it from every angle.

He looked to her again.

"You should keep this with you at all times. It is a good knife," he said, placing the knife back in the bag. Clarke nodded, shrugging slightly.

Though she didn't know how to use it yet, it couldn't hurt to keep it with her. It might even bring her
a sense of safety eventually.

Suddenly, Clarke thought of something.

"Where are Belou and Zenya? I just realized I haven't seen them since they brought you to me the first time."

Lincoln looked slightly guilty at this, picking absently at some rocks by his feet before he answered.

"I sent them away. I forbid them from coming to see you again, telling them to speak of your location to no one," he said quietly, looking back up into her eyes.

"I could not risk anyone finding out about you then. Not if I was going to help you. I don't know how my people would react." He shrugged, looking slightly apologetic.

Clarke nodded, understanding.

"Well, I'm grateful to you either way," she told him sincerely. "But, I'm curious...what made them so sure they could trust you to help me in the first place? Not that I'm questioning you or anything, I just..." she trailed off, praying he would understand why she was asking.

He seemed to, looking up into the night sky to gaze at the stars peppering the darkness above them as he spoke.

"I have always been one of the more...hopeful members of our clan," he spoke softly now, expression slightly troubled.

"From the time I began my training as a warrior, I always hoped we could have peace. Stability. Something more than just living from battle to battle." He shook his head slightly, looking back to meet Clarke's gaze.

"Some would call me naive, but I believe we owe it to ourselves to see the bigger picture. We were not given a second chance on this planet just to spend it by killing each other." He spoke with firm resolve now.

Clarke couldn't help but agree with him on that.
"Our Commander, she shares my belief. I see it in her eyes every time she must lead us into yet another battle. She dislikes killing perhaps more than any of us - I know she does - but it is our way. It always has been. *Jus drein jus daun,*" he finished, a hint of bitterness in his eyes.

Clarke tilted her head in question.

"Blood must have blood," he clarified.

Clarke shivered at that. If that is their way...

"We aren't so different after all, then," she concluded quietly. He narrowed his eyes in question. She shrugged,

"It's a little too much to explain at the moment, but let's just say our 'way' isn't much different from yours. It couldn't be, not with such limited resources..." she trailed off.

How sad it was that the world had ended so violently only to devolve into the same never-ending cycle of death and cruelty that had brought its end about in the first place. It seemed not even those who had made it to space had managed to escape it.

Clarke couldn't think about that fact without her throat constricting a little.

"You know," she said, trying for something lighter, "you're probably going to have to teach me some of your language. That is, if you want me to blend in with your culture and all," she teased.

He quirked an eyebrow at her, a smirk playing at his lips.

Before he could respond, though, a loud thump brought his attention away from her.

His head whipped up to scan the tree line, instantly searching for the source of the sound. Clarke's heart rate spiked immediately.

Lincoln snapped up from his crouching position and turned away from her, placing himself between whatever had made the sound and where she sat by the riverside, defenseless. He reached around to unsheathe the sword at his back and pulled it over his head, angling it in a defensive position.
He continued to scan the tree line, his head slowly turning to take in the entire scene as Clarke craned her neck to look into the forest.

All she could make out was darkness.

Lincoln froze.

Before Clarke could process what was happening, he was running straight ahead towards the tree line at a dead sprint.

Before he could reach it, though, he was suddenly launched sideways by a dark figure swinging down from one of the trees hidden in darkness with a guttural war cry.

The figure had apparently kicked him in his side, landing with a crunch on the ground a few feet from him as they did so.

The figure abruptly turned to Clarke.

Her blood immediately ran cold.

Before her stood the most intimidating woman she had ever seen in her entire life.

In the darkness, Clarke could make out a pair of fur boots beneath a hooded overcoat that ran all the way to her ankles. The jacket had a metal plate on each shoulder and was lined with fur towards the neckline and into the hood, which was down. The outside of the jacket shone in the moonlight as if was made of some kind of leather. It was gathered by a leather belt at the waistline, which held a knife sheath and along with multiple unseen weapons, probably.

What terrified Clarke the most, though, wasn't her warrior dress; it was her face.

Framed in dirty blonde hair that had two braids running from above her ears to behind her head and got lighter at the tips was the most severe face Clarke had ever seen.

The woman's cheekbones protruded in her thin face and were coupled with a hard jawline which
was currently clenched. Her eyes appeared as if they were hollowed out, the effect of the war paint she wore around both that was isolated to the areas beneath her brow and slightly below her eyes, never crossing over onto the bridge of her nose.

Those eyes glared at her now with the most bewildering hatred Clarke had ever seen. The woman's thin lips were set into a hard line.

She took a couple of heated steps towards Clarke's trembling figure before Lincoln called to her, still sprawled on the ground.

"Anya, hod op!" he implored breathlessly, struggling to sit up. He'd probably gotten the wind knocked out of him, Clarke thought.

The woman, Anya, stopped in her tracks, turning to him. Clarke could practically see the waves of anger radiating off of the woman.

Lincoln rose onto his knees unsteadily before climbing to his feet and taking a step towards her slowly, sword at his feet. He held his hands out in front of him, placating. His eyes were pleading as he began to speak to Anya in their language.

She barked her response back at him furiously, pointing accusingly at Clarke as she did so. Lincoln winced slightly at her words before responding in a much softer voice.

From what Clarke could tell, he appeared to be reasoning with her about something. She figured he was arguing upon Clarke's behalf, and she waited with baited breath as the two warriors exchanged words.

Anya maintained her anger throughout the entire discussion, taking a few aggressive steps towards Lincoln and back again every now and then.

Clarke couldn't even begin to figure out what they were saying and it was incredibly frustrating.

After Lincoln said something in practically a whisper, Anya pursed her lips for a moment, working her jaw back and forth, considering. She turned her fiery stare on Clarke who blanched slightly under the gaze.
Without warning, Anya turned back to Lincoln and closed the distance between them, removing the
knife from its sheath at her waist and knocking him hard in the side of the head with the end of the
handle.

He crumpled onto the ground almost instantly.

"Lincoln!!" Clarke cried, incredibly distressed as she looked at her unconscious friend.

Anya turned her attention back to Clarke at that.

She was towering over Clarke in seconds, looking down at her with utter loathing.

With an incredible amount of force, Anya brought her fist down and connected with the side of
Clarke's head in one swift motion.

Clarke's world faded to black upon impact.
Once again, Clarke felt a pounding inside her skull.

She registered that she was laying flat out on her back as she blinked her eyes open slowly. She felt something crunch beneath her. Leaves, maybe.

She was staring up at a ceiling.

How odd.

Turning her head slightly, she appraised her surroundings.

The first thing she noticed was the barred gate that served as the only entrance to the room.

With a pang, Clarke realized that she was, once again, back in a prison cell.

The walls of the room looked as if they had originally been precisely tiled, the one on her left containing the most of any of them. She noted a large horizontal golden line with blue borders running across the middle of it that served as the only "decoration" on the walls. It was broken off by huge black smudges down the length of the wall in different places.

The wall in front of her broke off the pattern of tiles to reveal a concrete slab underneath, one that had caved in slightly. The rest of that wall was made of the same concrete with some tiles remaining here and there. Clarke noted that those tiles had probably been white originally.
She had been right about the leaves.

Beneath her, and everywhere that the eye could see, was a thick layer of leaves that covered the concrete floor almost entirely. They appeared as if they hadn't been disturbed in a very long time, although Clarke knew that probably wasn't the case.

Slowly pushing onto her left side, she noted that the sling had been removed from her right arm.

She huffed with the effort as she inched her way towards the wall on her left, grasping for any kind of leverage she could find with her left hand. She glanced at the shackle around her left ankle that ran on a pretty long chain attached to the middle of the wall beside her.

After a painful couple minutes of maneuvering her body, Clarke finally sat with her back against the wall, right arm resting gently in her lap. She took slow, deep breaths to calm herself from the exertion.

She stared at the locked gate in front of her.

Anya must've brought her here when she was knocked out, presumably taking her supplies from her, as well. The throbbing ache throughout her body told Clarke that Anya hadn't been as careful with her as Lincoln had. Not nearly.

There was light streaming in from a staircase just beyond the outside of the cell gate, as well as through some cracks in the ceiling, and Clarke found herself even more confused as to her whereabouts.

Was she in some sort of prison complex? A solitary building out in the middle of nowhere? She had no clue.

Before Clarke had time to think about anything else, she heard the sounds of multiple pairs of footsteps descending the stairs.

All the pairs of footsteps seemed to make it to the gate at once. There appeared to be four people in front of her, although she could only see three of them - they were blocking the fourth, who was
apparently smaller than they were.

Clarke was just as terrified of them as she had been of Anya. Maybe more so.

The warrior in the middle appeared to be the leader. He was an exceptionally large man with a strong chest and thick muscles layering every part of his body. He had long black hair that was braided back in an intricate style Clarke couldn't make out, as well as an extremely long beard that was only slightly groomed.

He wore dark combat boots similar to Lincoln's beneath a long dark coat that covered slacks and a plain shirt. The jacket was elaborate in its design and he had a sword strapped across his chest.

His faced was slightly aged - maybe a little older than her father had been when he died - and it was set in hard lines, his brow furrowed as he glared at Clarke sitting against the wall.

The two warriors flanking him sported similar garb, although theirs was more of a dark green color, with a bit more netting in certain parts of the uniform. They both wore elaborate masks that obscured their face from view, and Clarke didn't allow her gaze to linger on them for too long as it scared her to do so.

The black-haired man stepped forward, removing a set of keys from his pocket and moving to unlock the gate.

As he pushed the door open, he looked over his shoulder and nodded to the fourth person, moving aside so that they could enter the cell.

What Clarke saw utterly bewildered her.

The fourth person was a girl, not much older than Clarke. Her frame was slight but seemingly athletic, and her skin held a slightly tanned hue.

She was wearing what Clarke could only assume were rags. They were a bluish grey color, and the top was sleeveless and loose, revealing a tribal-looking tattoo on her right arm. She sported fingerless arm protectors that ran halfway up both arms, made of cloth and ripped in some places. She wore similarly colored pants that hugged her legs tightly and were stitched at the knees. She had on loose leather combat boots that looked pretty beaten up, the shoelaces coming untied a little.
A tattered cloth headband that met behind her neck and came around to hang off her chest held a thick head of brown hair away from her face - brown hair that seemed to be laced with intricate braids in various patterns. It cascaded over her shoulders in waves.

What struck Clarke the most, though, was her face.

It was stunning.

It had to be one of the most symmetrical faces she'd ever seen. She had high cheekbones and a sharp jawline that met small ears on either side. Her lips were perfectly plump. Though Clarke couldn't quite make out her eye color yet, she knew they had to be beautiful.

She would expect nothing less from such a face - even covered in soot as it was.

Clarke immediately regretted not having bathed since she'd gotten to the ground, cursing the cuts that lined her face.

The girl limped in, dragging her right leg behind her as she did so. She cradled what appeared to be a water jug in her left arm.

Once she was in the cell, the black-haired man said something to her in their language and she nodded, ducking her head submissively. He closed the gate behind her and locked it, giving Clarke one last seething glare as he turned away and retreated up the stairs, the two guards slightly behind him.

The girl limped her way over to the wall on Clarke's left and lowered herself down against it painfully slowly, cradling the jug against her chest as she did so. She sat slightly hunched over, her body angled a little bit away from Clarke, with her knees pulled up to her chest.

Clarke felt a pang of sympathy for the girl. She didn't deserve to be Clarke's maidservant - or cell mate, for that matter.

Clarke wondered what she'd done in order to be punished in such a way.
The girl set the jug down softly on her right side, the side that was closest to Clarke. Clarke eyed the jar for a moment while they sat in silence.

After a few minutes, Clarke decided she'd finally had enough of the silence. She cleared her throat a little.

"If you don't mind my asking, what happened to your leg?" she inquired gently, eyeing the girl's profile.

She desperately hoped the girl understood English. She didn't really know how many of the Grounders actually did - or how, for that matter, those who learned the language were chosen to do so.

The girl didn't look at Clarke or respond in any way for a moment. Then, finally,

"I was born with it this way," she replied softly.

Clarke was immediately relieved at the girl's response. At least she had someone to talk to now.

She still refused to look at Clarke. Her voice sounded incredibly youthful, almost musical in its lilt. Clarke decided then that she liked the sound of it.

"Ah, okay," Clarke nodded sympathetically, looking at the girl. She was staring at her lap now, fiddling with a leaf she had picked up from the ground.

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, my leg probably won't work right for a long time, either," Clarke said, gently patting her bad leg with her left hand.

The girl looked up at that. She met Clarke's eyes with her own for the first time, and Clarke knew she'd been right.

They were beautiful. A green not unlike that of the trees Clarke had been so entranced by not so long ago. They had a depth to them that aged the girl a bit, a depth Clarke couldn't even begin to fathom while their gaze was locked.
They were currently regarding Clarke with guarded curiosity, brows furrowed above them.

"What happened?" the girl asked quietly. Clarke shrugged a little.

"Don't know exactly. I was unconscious when it happened. Probably got screwed up when I landed," Clarke told her.

She suddenly remembered her manners.

"I'm Clarke, by the way. Clarke Griffin. What's your name?"

The girl narrowed her eyes a little bit, still maintaining her gaze with Clarke's for a moment before she looked down at her lap again where her hands rested. She still twirled the leaf between the fingers of her left hand.

"Lexa," the girl replied, throat working as she did so.

A nice name, Clarke thought. It suited her.

"Nice to meet you, then," she said, smiling a little bit. Lexa continued to twirl the leaf, not looking up.

They sat in silence for a few moments.

"'Landed?'" Lexa questioned softly, meeting Clarke's gaze with a confused look in her eyes. Clarke nodded.

"More like, crashed," she quipped, chuckling once. Lexa grew more confused.

"I don't understand," she admitted.

Clarke pursed her lips for a moment, looking down at her lap. How much should she tell this girl? She seemed nice enough, but Clarke knew she was probably here to gather information from her.
It was *who* that information was going to that really mattered to Clarke.

Nodding a little to herself, Clarke decided she could tell Lexa about as much as she'd told Lincoln. The truth wouldn't hurt at this point.

"Well, when I say 'crashed,' I really mean my pod crashed, not me, exactly," Clarke explained, meeting the girl's curious gaze again. "I'm...from space?" It came out more as a question than anything, and Clarke realized how ridiculous she probably sounded to this girl. She didn't know how else to say it, though.

"I passed out when my pod entered the atmosphere, and luckily the damn thing came with a parachute. Otherwise, I'd be very dead right now. I'm lucky I managed not to get injuries more severe than the ones I have, to be honest," she finished, her tone somewhat light and factual.

Lexa looked utterly taken aback.

Clarke might've laughed at her comically bewildered expression under any other circumstances, but she felt it might be inappropriate now.

Lexa attempted to school her expression, eyes wide and mouth agape. She looked down to her lap and back at Clarke a couple times before speaking again.

"You...are...from...space?" she managed, looking at Clarke with utter confusion and alarm.

Clarke almost felt bad for the girl. It had to be a startling thing to learn and try to contemplate.

"Yep," Clarke answered simply, shrugging again. Lexa continued to gawk at her, shaking her head a little bit.

"And...you are alone?" she asked quietly, genuine curiosity coloring her features now.

Clarke looked down at her lap, face falling noticeably. She stayed silent for a moment, fighting back
the tears that suddenly sprung to her eyes at the innocent question.

Clarke met Lexa's gaze again, eyes watery.

"Yes."

Her voice cracked over the word and she instantly looked down at her lap again. How *embarrassing*, she thought begrudgingly.

She heard some shuffling of leaves beside her and she looked up.

Lexa had moved a little bit closer to her, scooting the water jug beside her as she inched along the wall. Her brow was still furrowed as she regarded Clarke with a semblance of sympathy.

"Why would you come alone?" she asked softly, tilting her head a little. Clarke sighed.

"I didn't have a choice," she answered just as softly, albeit slightly bitter. "I was taken from my cell in the middle of the night and basically thrown in the pod without warning."

Lexa looked confused again.

"Your cell?" she questioned. Clarke nodded.

"I'd been in solitary confinement for around four months," she told her matter-of-factly. Lexa screwed up her features at that.

"Solitary confinement? You are a criminal?" she asked, a slight undercurrent in her tone. Clarke couldn't figure out what it was.

"I suppose so, yes," she shrugged, looking at her hands. "Every crime is punishable by death if you're 18 years old and up. Anyone younger than that is thrown in prison until their 18th birthday when they can be reviewed by the council again," she explained. She looked up to meet Lexa's gaze once more.
"Thankfully, I'm 17."

Lexa eyed her suspiciously for a moment. Clarke could almost see the wheels in her head turning. She seemed as if she was trying to figure out exactly the right way to phrase her next question.

"What was your crime?" she asked, a little abruptly, her voice taking on a tone Clarke hadn't yet heard from her. It was almost authoritative.

Clarke narrowed her eyes a little bit. Lexa seemed to catch herself, looking down at her hands again, shoulders slumping forward a little more. A gesture of submissiveness.

Clarke cleared her throat.

"I was trying to help, but it backfired on me," she quipped bitterly. "It doesn't matter much now, though, does it?"

Lexa looked back up at her then, brow furrowing.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean, I'm pretty sure I was brought here to be killed, right?" Clarke questioned, locking eyes with Lexa. Her tone was almost nonchalant.

Lexa seemed thrown by her question. Her jaw clenched, working back and forth as she stared at Clarke. She seemed to be contemplating something.

"I-I'm not sure," she said, looking down. She was noticeably uncomfortable now.

Clarke looked away from her and leaned her head back against the wall, staring up at the ceiling.

"Oh well, I guess," she said, her voice quietly neutral. She heard shuffling to her left again but didn't
look away from the ceiling.

"You don't care whether you live or die?" Lexa's voice questioned from somewhere off to the left. She sounded utterly disbelieving.

Clarke shrugged, closing her eyes.

"I haven't had anything to live for in a very long time," she replied honestly, voice low.

She felt herself being pulled towards sleep all of a sudden.

Although she knew it was probably rude to tune the other girl out like this, she didn't see the harm in allowing herself to drift off into the blackness. She probably wouldn't be alive much longer, regardless.

At least she could find some peace there.

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Someone was shaking her shoulder.

It was gentle at first, but grew slightly more firm as Clarke continued to fight against the lingering darkness.

She blinked her eyes open with a start.

Lessa recoiled her hand immediately, moving it to her side to grasp at the hem of her ragged shirt nervously. Her brows were furrowed as she stood over Clarke, expression unreadable.

Clarke worked to steady her breathing as the other girl watched her. She felt wetness on her face and swiped her good hand across her cheek, removing the tear tracks that had settled there.
She knew she'd been having a nightmare.

Her rest had become fitful in the familiar grasp of the terrors that had haunted her since she was a little girl - terrors that had become much more severe after the death of her father.

She sighed regretfully as she realized she still couldn't escape them, even on the ground.

She thought she'd been sleeping so well for the past few days. Perhaps it was just her body providing reprieve while trying to focus on healing the physical wounds to her frame. She figured it had to be some sort of natural defense mechanism her body employed to keep her from spiraling into an unending cycle of pain and misery.

It was the little things, right?

Lexa still hovered over her, watching Clarke's every movement with cautious eyes.

"Sorry about that," Clarke mumbled, still attempting to steady her breathing.

Lexa tilted her head, confusion lighting her attractive features.

"Why would you apologize?" she questioned softly.

"Ah, I dunno. I guess it's just my way of coping with embarrassment," Clarke shrugged. The confusion in Lexa's face increased even more.

"You are embarrassed?" she pressed, continuing to stand over Clarke.

Clarke chuckled, shaking her head a little. She wanted to change the subject.

She looked around the cell for a moment until her gaze landed on the water jug sitting where Clarke had last seen it. She nodded her head towards it.
"Would you mind if I had some of that?" she pointed towards the jug.

Lexa narrowed her eyes a bit, clearly displeased by the change of subject.

It was strange, Clarke thought: one minute, the girl was all submissive and barely willing to meet Clarke's eyes. The next, she seemed to take on an aura of authority that seemed to fill up the space with a level of intensity Clarke was slightly intimidated by.

She didn't know what to make of it.

Lexa seemed to consider something in a silent revery before she relented, turning her body away from Clarke and limping painfully over to the jug. Clarke bit her lip, regretting having asked the girl to expend so much effort on her behalf.

She pushed herself away from the wall with her left hand on the floor and began to inch her way over to Lexa, chain rattling as it was dragged along behind her.

Lexa froze mid-bend and looked behind her to see Clarke slowly making her way across the floor. Her expression became wary almost immediately, narrowing her eyes at Clarke's advance, unsure of what to do.

Clarke stopped a foot from the girl.

"I'm not going to hurt you," she spoke sincerely, voice quiet. "I just realized it was probably rude to make you wait on me. I can get it myself, if that's alright?" She looked up at Lexa innocently, hoping to convey as much of a non-threatening demeanor as possible.

Lexa looked befuddled for a moment. She straightened up, turning to face Clarke, and wrung her hands in front of her anxiously. After a moment, she kept her eyes trained on Clarke as she motioned to the jug in a gesture of permission.

Clarke smiled gratefully at the girl and scooted the rest of the way to the wall. She winced a little as the chain tugged on her left ankle, forcing her to stop for a moment to readjust. Once she'd untwisted her limbs a bit, she turned over to sit against the left wall, breathing heavily from exertion.
She glanced up at Lexa who had been following her every movement with cautious eyes.

"See? I couldn't even hurt you if I wanted to," Clarke joked, motioning lazily at her bum leg. Lexa raised a brow at her.

They weren't far apart now, Lexa watching as Clarke moved to pick up the water jug with her left hand. She lifted it to her mouth and took a generous gulp, savoring the cool liquid that ran down her throat.

"Want some?" she asked Lexa, holding the jug out to her a bit. Lexa shook her head, taking a small step back.

Clarke shrugged, lifting the jug back to her lips and continuing to drink.

After a few minutes of silence, Lexa finally sat back down slowly, legs crossed in front of her. She was still only a couple feet from Clarke, her body turned completely towards her.

"Why are you here?" she asked after a beat, genuine curiosity coloring her tone.

Clarke shrugged, "I got captured."

Lexa rolled her eyes at that. A youthful gesture, Clarke noted.

"That's not what I meant," Lexa huffed, exasperated. Clarke quirked a corner of her mouth up.

"Ah, right. You mean, why am I here on Earth?" Lexa nodded.

"Well, it's a bit of a long story. One that's not particularly pleasant to tell. But, the bottom line is that the Ark is dying and our leaders are desperate. Desperate enough to send a random girl on a suicide mission to a planet they clearly knew nothing about." Her voice was incredibly bitter now.

Lexa looked absolutely intrigued.
"Suicide mission?" Why do you believe they knew so little?" she asked, green eyes locked onto blue in total engagement.

It was a bit distracting.

"I...uh," Clarke stuttered for a moment, trying to gather her thoughts. "I mean, we'd been told our entire lives that the Earth wouldn't be safe for another hundred years. They didn't have enough data on the bombings to determine whether or not anyone had survived the war, in the first place. We were naive enough to believe that we were the only ones left." Clarke snorted, shaking her head in disbelief. She looked down at the jug still resting on her lap.

"Clearly, we were wrong. And they sent me down here knowing that I probably didn't stand a snowball's chance in hell." Lexa seemed momentarily thrown by the expression.

Clarke waited, looking back up to meet her gaze and quirking an eyebrow at her. After a brief moment, Lexa nodded at Clarke to continue, apparently having processed the saying.

"Long story short, they sent me down here to die. They knew the chances of me making it were slim, but they still sent me anyway. I guess I get it, though," Clarke said, resting her head against the wall, "I'm expendable. Too much trouble for what I'm worth, I suppose."

From the corner of her eye, Clarke could see Lexa struggling to process everything. She looked incredibly displeased by what Clarke had said, acting as if she wanted to say something. But she didn't, schooling her expression back into a calm mask.

Clarke was momentarily impressed.

"What makes you think that you are expendable?" Lexa asked, expression startlingly blank all of a sudden.

Clarke frowned at that.

Beyond the obvious reasons of her simply being another useless prisoner on the Ark, she knew she didn't have the best self-concept of anyone, but she didn't feel like explaining that to this girl. She had
already said too much, and she was a bit unnerved by how observant Lexa was.

She wasn't used to people paying so much attention to what she said.

"When you hear it enough times, you start to believe it," Clarke shrugged, looking impassive. "I'm probably not the only one who feels that way, though. They aren't too fond of egos or self-confidence up on the Ark."

Lexa's stoic mask cracked a little, revealing a strange anger that Clarke couldn't place. She seemed extremely upset by this for whatever reason. Clarke really couldn't figure out why she was reacting this way.

Lexa stood up suddenly, surprisingly graceful considering her bad leg. She brushed herself off absently, looking down at Clarke with barely-contained frustration.

"Well, the Commander must think you hold something of value. Otherwise, you would be dead by now," she nearly growled.

Clarke furrowed her brows, exceptionally thrown by Lexa's words.

Why did the girl sound like she was trying to convince herself just as much as Clarke? Clarke was utterly confused.

"So I am meeting the Commander, then," she mumbled, mostly to herself.

Lexa heard her though, and the anger was instantly replaced by a look of wariness. She took an aggressive step towards Clarke, eyes narrowed accusingly.

"How do you know of the Commander?" she asked, menancingly quiet. Clarke was starting to believe her initial assessment of the submissive girl was grossly inaccurate.

"I...," she struggled to find her words under the girl's intimidating glare. "A friend told me about her. He said it would be wise to seek audience with her before I do anything else." She was purposefully vague with Lexa, hoping not to incriminate Lincoln further or appear threatening in any way.
Lexa narrowed her eyes even more, taking another step towards Clarke so that she was now towering over her. Clarke had to lean her head back just to meet the girl's hot gaze.

"And what did this friend tell you?" she spat. Clarke's heart rate sped up as she realized she was slightly afraid of the girl in this moment.

She needed to tread lightly.

"That...the Commander is smart," she said quietly, hoping to placate the angry girl before her. Lexa must be pretty damn loyal to the Commander if she was getting so heated over this.

"That she is interested in peace, same as me. He seemed to really respect her. I'd be interested to speak with her," she finished almost in a whisper now.

Lexa seemed a little taken aback, clearly not expecting Clarke's response - although what she had been expecting, Clarke couldn't even begin to guess.

Her intensity faded away almost immediately, replaced by that strange calmness once again.

It seemed to be somewhat of a mask to Clarke.

She took a couple steps back from Clarke and sat back down, seeming to remember her bum leg.

"You believe you, alone, will be able to engage the Commander in peace talks?" Lexa inquired softly, eyebrow raised in disbelief. She rested her hands on her crossed legs, hunching forward a little. Submissive, once again.

Clarke considered her question for a moment.

"It couldn't hurt to try, right?" she quipped, smirking a little.
"It might," Lexa answered immediately.

Clarke frowned. It had been a rhetorical question.

"Are you telling me the Commander is fond of torture?" Clarke asked, eyeing Lexa carefully. The girl's facial expression was unreadable.

"She does what she must."

The words were deep with meaning that Clarke couldn't even begin to understand.

She didn't know if she wanted to.

"Ah. Well, hopefully she doesn't find it necessary." Clarke paused for a moment. "I wonder what she'll make of me..." she trailed off, suddenly lost in her train of thought. Lexa seemed to be just as thoughtful, her stoic expression considering. Her lips were pursed as she mused, eyebrows slightly creased.

"I am not sure she knows what to think of you just yet," Lexa mumbled slowly, more to herself than Clarke.

Clarke raised her eyebrow at the girl.

"You must be pretty close to her if you know what she thinks and all," Clarke mused. Lexa was careful not to react.

"One might say so, yes." Lexa's eyes danced with hidden humor in her otherwise expressionless face. Clarke huffed.

"Well, I guess she can't be that bad then," Clarke said, somewhat flirtatiously.

When Lexa looked at her in utter confusion, she hurriedly clarified, "I mean, you seem pretty...nice, I guess, and I figure anyone you like can't be that bad. I dunno," she shrugged, working to maintain
her nonchalance while simultaneously wanting to kick herself.

She knew she was being a bit forward, but whatever. A little flattery couldn't hurt in this situation, right?

Lexa's confusion was replaced by something else Clarke couldn't quite understand, and she seemed to be working on schooling her expression back into calmness. Her eyes flashed a number of warring emotions as she did so.

She was clearly struggling with something.

"That...seems like questionable logic," she said finally. She seemed a little uncomfortable.

Clarke shrugged, un-phased.

"I've been known to rely on it," she smirked at the girl, attempting to draw some sort of positive response from her.

To Clarke's disappointment, she remained stoic. Lexa appeared not to know what to say.

Clarke shrugged once again, suddenly feeling the need to stand up. She began to work her way up the wall, putting all of her weight on her left side as she did so. She clenched her jaw with the effort.

"What are you doing?" Lexa asked immediately, quiet with cautious suspicion.

Clarke ignored her, continuing to work her way up the wall. She hissed in pain as she came to a standing position. Lexa watched her tensely from the floor.

Using a little leverage from the wall, she pushed herself away from it and hobbled unsteadily on her left leg. She kept her right leg slightly bent at the knee, hovering a little off the ground behind her. She reached her left arm across her body to steady her on the wall.

Hopping a couple steps on her left foot, she slowly made progress away from the wall behind her
and towards the center of the room. Still balancing herself with her left hand, she decided it couldn’t hurt to test her right leg now.

She lowered it to the ground slowly, putting a little weight on it. A sharp sting shot through her, but it was nothing unbearable. Perhaps she would heal faster than she’d originally thought.

"Maybe that's not such a good idea..." Lexa said timidly from behind her. Clarke heard the sound of shuffling leaves.

Once again ignoring Lexa, she decided to step onto her right leg, putting significantly more weight on it.

Lexa had been right. Bad idea.

Immediately, electric pain shot through her leg and up her entire body, causing her teeth to snap together and her vision to go blurry around the edges. Her knee instantly buckled, leaving her crumbling to the ground at alarming speed. She heard a flurry of movement behind her.

Suddenly, she found herself wrapped in Lexa's arms.

Clarke had no clue how the girl had gotten to her so fast. Her reaction was almost instant, her arms catching Clarke from behind and snaking around her waist to keep her from falling.

She had all of Clarke's weight against her now, and Clarke had no idea how Lexa - as slight as she was - was holding her.

Letting the waves of pain pass for a moment, Clarke allowed herself to be completely held up by the other girl. As they passed, though, she suddenly became aware of Lexa's lithe body pressed against her back, of her strong arms supporting her frame.

Her heart stuttered a little as she used her left leg to steady herself. Seeming to notice Clarke gaining control again, Lexa immediately retracted her arms from around the other girl.

Clarke noted how Lexa seemed to almost flinch away from her now, suddenly coming back to
herself.

After a moment, Clarke pivoted on her left leg to face Lexa.

Her features were utterly composed - if not somewhat timid once again - the sharp rise and fall of her chest the only indication of her exerted effort. Her hands were clenched into white-knuckled fists at her sides for some reason.

"Uh...well," Clarke began, feeling slightly awkward, "I guess that wasn't such a good idea. Had to test it, though." She shrugged a little to herself.

"Thanks for catching me, Lexa," she said sincerely. The other girl pursed her lips and gave Clarke a curt nod.

Clarke realized this was the first time she'd said the other girl's name out loud. Strangely enough, she liked the sound of it.

Without meaning to, the girls fell into somewhat of a staring contest. Blue eyes locked onto green and refused to waver. It wasn't hostile or anything, simply curious. Searching. Both looking for something they didn't quite know of in the other's eyes. Both exceptionally intrigued by the other, it appeared. Both confused as to why they suddenly found themselves in such a predicament.

Both refusing to look away.

After probably much too long, their gaze was broken by the sound of heavy footsteps descending the stairs to the cell.

Lexa seemed to come back to herself first, shaking her head a little and clearing her throat, eyes fixing on the floor in front of her in a gesture of timidity.

Clarke's eyes lingered on the girl's face, though. In it, she saw what looked to be a great deal of conflict. Conflict and...displeasure? Unease? Who knows?

Whatever it was, it was fighting to be controlled by Lexa's stoic mask.
Remembering it was probably rude to stare, she shifted her gaze over to the now-opening gate.

The same black-haired man was opening it, the two masked warriors flanking him once again.

He glanced at Clarke with something close to contempt before fixing his gaze on Lexa and barking something at her in their language. Her eyes shifted to him from the floor and she nodded slightly, seeming to cower a bit under his gaze.

Clarke felt a prickle at the back of her neck then, wanting to put herself between the man and Lexa for whatever reason, but she stayed put.

Without a word, Lexa slowly began to limp across the cell to the gate, eyes remaining glued to the floor. She stepped on the other side of it, back turned to Clarke, as the black-haired warrior suddenly strode up to Clarke.

She felt herself shudder as he came to tower over her.

"We will return to fetch you in two candle marks," he spoke flatly, voice full of authority. "You will then be taken to the Commander. Only Heda will be able to determine your fate now." He was sneering at her, voice menacingly low.

Clarke blanched a little under the intimidation but remained completely still, not backing down.

After another moment of intimidation, the warrior turned away from Clarke, picked up the water jug, and made his way from the cell in long strides.

He turned to lock the gate behind him, throwing Clarke one last hateful look, and strode towards the steps with the two masked warriors on his heels, Lexa scurrying behind them.

As the warriors disappeared up the steps, Lexa hesitated a bit. She stopped at the bottom step, turning her head to meet Clarke's gaze one last time with an unreadable expression on her face.

After a lingering moment, she limped up the steps after the warriors.
Leaving Clarke completely dumbfounded.

----------------------------------------

After what felt like a lifetime later, Clarke found herself being guided out of the cell with a bag covering her face.

She hadn't protested as they'd placed it over her head; it was only when they roughly forced both of her arms down in front of her to be tied at the wrists that she'd cried out in pain.

Thankfully, though, she felt herself being swooped off her feet not long afterwards, saving her from the agony of attempting to walk.

That pain in her weirdly-positioned right arm was the only thing she could focus on as she was carried blindly to their destination. It protested every single movement, and she tried not to whimper against the agony threatening to make her pass out.

She clamped her jaw shut to stop any unwanted sounds, praying to whatever holy deity was listening that their journey was short-lived.

Regardless of the time, Clarke found herself teetering on the edge of consciousness when they abruptly came to a stop. Clarke hadn't paid any attention to the walk here, knowing full-well that she would be unable to discern any important details. Better to focus on controlling her pain levels.

She heard a stern - yet oddly familiar - voice command something to the guards who had brought her here.

She heard a chorus of "sha, Heda," - whatever the hell that meant - and felt herself being lowered to the ground with surprising gentleness. It was exceptionally unexpected, but greatly welcomed all the same.
After a moment, she shifted a little on what felt like...fur? It was hard beneath the cushion so she knew she still had to be on the ground, but it was still incredibly odd.

The bag was lifted from her head and she found that she didn't have to blink much for her eyes to adjust to the light that originated from a plethora of candles placed around the room, as it was apparently nighttime.

Clarke also noted that she had been right about the fur, a thick rug situated beneath her comfortably.

Everything about this situation made absolutely zero sense to Clarke. She probably shouldn't have been surprised though - nothing on the ground had been what it seemed so far.

She didn't get a chance to look around the rest of the tent she now sat in, though, as her gaze was suddenly fixed on the figure before her.

Sitting a couple of steps above Clarke on an elaborate throne of bones and wood was an immediately familiar face.

Except, nothing about the person she saw before her was all that familiar now. In fact, she barely recognized the girl in front of her when she took a closer look.

Swallowing thickly against the fear and uncertainty now coursing through her, she spoke.

"Lexa?"
This certainly wasn't what Clarke had been expecting.

As she took in the scene before her, time seemed to still around them.

Sitting on the throne before her was, without a doubt, Lexa.

Except, she wasn't the Lexa that Clarke thought she knew.

She was dressed in all black. From the combat boots on her feet to the fingerless gloves around her fingers. She wore tight black pants tucked into the boots, a buttoned overcoat (that looked more like a hoodless cloak of sorts) secured over her torso that stopped near her ankles. Some sort of metal pauldron held a flowing red sash in place over one shoulder; the sash ran all the way to the floor and pooled at her feet.

Her clothes weren't the most startling thing about her appearance, though.
It was the war paint.

The black paint framed the girl's green eyes and ran down her cheeks as if she had cried jagged tears of ink. Or perhaps they resembled black claw marks. Clarke couldn't decide.

All she knew was that it was terrifying.

It was contrasted by some sort of golden head piece placed between her brows.

Lexa's hair was braided away from her face in a much more elaborate manner than before, the style seeming to match the formal nature of her status.

Everything about the way she carried herself now - from the way she sat upon the throne, legs crossed, to the rigid set of her spine - screamed of a regality Clarke had only ever read about in books. It was intimidating as it was awe-inspiring, and Clarke found herself immensely intrigued by the being before her.

She was positively striking.

As soon as Clarke uttered the girl's name in a voice strangled by nerves and confusion, she saw a flurry of movement before her.

Without warning, Anya was suddenly towering over her, a knife pressed against Clarke's throat. "You will address the Commander properly, skai gada, or I will take great pleasure in slitting your throat where you sit," she hissed, pressing the knife further into Clarke's skin. Clarke's eyes widened in fear at the warrior above her. Before she could respond in any way, Lexa's voice cut through the thick air in a deadly tone of authority.

"Anya, em pleni!" she instructed. "Leave her be. She does not know any better."

A look of annoyance flashed through Anya's eyes and she huffed, instantly retracting the knife. She turned to look at Lexa.
"I will not allow her to disrespect you, Heda. She must know her place," Anya imbibed.

"And she will. In time," Lexa promised. She was standing before her throne, having risen as Anya had rushed forward. She tapped her fingers impatiently on the handle of the knife sheathed at her waist.

"Until then, I expect you to show restraint. We wish her no harm."

Anya turned back to look down at Clarke, her expression seething.

"For now," the warrior whispered, shooting a hostile glare straight into the depths of Clarke's soul. The blonde shivered slightly, feeling uncomfortably exposed.

Anya spun around to make her way back up the steps to the throne a few feet in front of Clarke. She came to stand at attention to the left of the throne with her arms clasped behind her back, expression suddenly passive as she looked straight on.

On the right of the throne in the same stance as Anya stood a dark-skinned woman with markings and scars lining her hard face. She was dressed head-to-toe in armor, looking every bit the deadly warrior Clarke figured her to be.

To her left and down a step - also in the same ready stance - stood the black-haired man Clarke recognized from before.

Along with Lexa, they were probably the most imposing foursome she'd ever laid eyes on.

Lexa - not having looked away from Clarke the entire time - sat back down on her throne in a fluid motion.

"As a matter of fact," she turned her gaze from Clarke for the first time, addressing the warriors around her, "Anya, Gustus, Indra - I would like a moment to converse with our guest in private. Your presence is no longer required."
All three warriors turned to gape at their Commander incredulously.

"Heda, please -" The man, Gustus, began to protest. Lexa held up her hand and he immediately fell silent, mouth agape.

"Do you question my ability to defend myself?" Lexa asked, voice flat.

The three warriors looked immediately flustered as they responded in unison,

"Never, Heda."

"Then leave us. I will send for you when I am finished here." Lexa's tone was final, unwilling to hear more.

The warriors exchanged silent looks with one another, all incredibly uncomfortable, before nodding to Lexa. They began to make their way towards the entrance of the tent presumably behind Clarke. Each shot her scathing looks of warning as they passed, causing her to cower involuntarily on the floor.

She normally wasn't one to show fear like that, but under the threatening looks of the three warriors she really couldn't help how her body responded.

With a last swish of the tent flap behind her, Clarke found herself alone with the Commander.

She had absolutely no idea what to do.

Before she could think much about it, though, Lexa broke the silence.

"Clarke Griffin of the Sky People," she began, voice commanding as ever, "You look as if you might faint." She raised a brow in her otherwise stoic face. Clarke couldn't discern a single thing from her expression.

"I'm fine," Clarke sputtered. "Just a little...surprised, I guess."
Lexa maintained an intense level of eye contact, constantly searching Clarke's face for something.

"You do not see me as fit to lead my people?" she challenged, eyebrow still raised. She didn't sound angry, per say, simply inquisitive.

"No, no, no, that's not what I -" Clarke stammered, heart pounding, "That's not what I meant. I just wasn't expecting...sorry," Clarke finished lamely, looking down at her tied wrists. Her broken arm throbbed in reminder as she shifted both limbs in her lap. She bit her lip against the tears stinging the backs of her eyes as a result of the pain.

She heard movement and looked up to see Lexa descending the steps towards her. Her coat swished behind her regally as she glided to stand in front of Clarke.

No limp, Clarke noted - not at all surprising.

She flinched back in surprise as Lexa came to a graceful crouch in front of her. Lexa furrowed her brows a bit at Clarke's reaction to her.

"You are in pain," she observed, locking eyes with Clarke and gesturing toward her tied wrists. Clarke nodded hesitantly.

She didn't want to appear weak in front of the Commander, no matter how much pain she was in.

"My right arm is broken pretty badly," she told Lexa, nearly whispering now. "I was wearing a sling when Anya...found...me, but I guess someone must've taken it off when they put me in the cell." Clarke shrugged, wincing at the pain it caused.

"I probably need a cast of some sort."

Lexa didn't seem to like that. Her brow furrowed further and her eyes suddenly flashed in anger. She stood abruptly and shouted something to the guards Clarke presumed were standing outside the tent. She crouched back down, hard eyes locking back onto Clarke's.

She quickly reached to the knife at her belt and unsheathed it. Clarke recoiled immediately.
Lexa's eyes softened ever-so-slightly and her mouth formed a hard line. Once again, she looked slightly...*displeased* at Clarke's reaction to her.

Before Clarke registered what the Commander was doing, the bindings were suddenly cut away from her wrists. Lexa sheathed her knife and stood quickly, turning away from Clarke and striding back to sit on her throne.

Clarke's wrists sported deep red lines that only just managed not to break the skin, but she was grateful for the sudden freedom. Her arm throbbed a little less as she moved to cradle it against her.

Before Clarke could thank the Commander, her attention was directed towards the swish at the entrance of the tent behind her.

An older woman wearing a ragged dark blue dress approached Clarke with a couple items cradled in her arms. Her feet were bare and her long grey hair hung straight down to her lower back. She stooped down in front of Clarke and looked expectantly into her eyes.

Clarke found herself instantly comforted by the grey eyes that stared into her own from a kind face lined with age. Everything about the woman's demeanor seemed peaceful to Clarke.

Clarke realized the woman was waiting for instruction.

"Oh, right!" She shook her head, finding her voice. "It's my right arm. Feels like two compression fractures to my upper radius. Maybe one to my ulna, as well."

The woman stared uncomprehendingly at Clarke.

The Commander spoke up from the throne, translating Clarke's words as best she could into their language. The woman nodded as she listened to Lexa, her face remaining a peaceful mask. She motioned for Clarke's arm and the blonde obliged, laying it in the woman's waiting grasp.

Once again, Clarke found herself nearly on the brink of tears at being touched with such gentleness. It was such an unexpected gift in Clarke's life, and she intended to cherish every second she got to spend being regarded with such care.
She felt her eyes close as the woman quietly worked, wrapping Clarke's arm in the soft yet firm material forming a tight brace over her injuries. She'd suspected the Grounders wouldn't have been able to produce the typical cement casts they had been given back on the Ark, but she was grateful for the treatment nonetheless.

Keeping Clarke's broken arm bent at the elbow, the woman continued to wrap all the way up to Clarke's shoulder before finally taping it off. She then placed the arm in a cloth sling and guided the fabric over Clarke's head, securing it in place around her neck. Her movements stopped.

"Thank you," Clarke whispered, voice thick with emotion.

Lexa didn't translate, as the woman seemed to understand the sentiment. She kept her eyes closed as she felt the woman cup her cheek lightly, brushing away the tear that had escaped down Clarke's cheek. The woman slowly removed her hand and Clarke felt her stand up in front of her.

After a few moments, Clarke heard movement and the sound of the tent flap swishing behind her.

Her eyes remained shut.

"I was unaware of the injuries to your arm." Lexa spoke much more quietly now.

Something in the Commander's tone made Clarke open her eyes. She blinked against the lingering wetness in her eyes at the warm candlelight bathing the tent, a couple stray tears falling down her cheeks.

She didn't brush them away.

She met Lexa's gaze again and was surprised to see green eyes alight with intensity burning behind them. Though she maintained a stoic expression, Clarke thought she saw the corners of the Commander's mouth slightly down-turned.

"I would not have allowed your wrists to be tied had I known. I do not wish you any harm." She said the words with such an undercurrent of feeling that Clarke was slightly taken aback.

"If you are in too much pain to continue, we can reconvene after you've rested."
Clarke's expression softened at the sentiment. She hadn't been expecting such kindness.

"No, thank you, Commander. I'm alright now, thanks to your healer." She smiled a little at the girl before her. Lexa nodded once, intensity still present in her eyes.

They held each other's gaze for a few lingering moments.

"Then we shall proceed," Lexa stated, adjusting a little on her throne. She took the knife from her belt and began to twirl it lazily in her fingertips, much like she'd done with the leaf while sitting in the cell.

"Tell me, Clarke. What is it you wish to discuss?"

Clarke was momentarily caught up in the way Lexa had said her name, clicking the "k" with decisiveness. It gave her goosebumps for some reason.

"Right," Clarke said, shaking her head. "I need to radio my people back on the Ark and let them know I made it. I was wearing a bracelet that could keep track of my vital signs upon landing, see how my system responded to radiation levels, take note of any internal temperature changes - things like that. But it must've gotten removed somehow when I crashed, and now my people have no way of knowing whether or not I'm alive. In fact," Clarke paused, taking a steadying breath, "they probably think I'm pretty damn dead right now."

Lexa raised her eyebrow.

"And what happens when you 'radio' them, as you say?" she inquired, eyebrow still raised. Clarke frowned for a moment, considering.

Once again, Clarke was struck by the fact that she really didn't know what her people would do. She knew the end goal, of course: bring their people to the ground. However, she didn't know how and when they planned to do that - or what, for that matter, they intended to do once they got there.

She'd turned the scenario over multiple times in her head the past few days, and she couldn't seem to figure out a way to avoid problems regardless of the path they chose. Every possible route of action
the Arkers could take once on the ground seemed to end in some sort of blood shed - whether on
their part, or on the part of the Grounders.

She knew how stubborn and near-sighted her people could be - especially when it came to diplomatic
manners of any sort - and she didn't see them behaving any differently with the Grounders. She
shuddered at how they might respond to the knowledge of an established group of people
maintaining a completely foreign civilization of their own, subject to laws that are completely outside
of the jurisdiction of the Chancellor and Council.

Certainly there would be fear of every sort; fear of the indigenous people, fear of their culture, fear of
violence or retaliation - fear of anything unknown, really. Perhaps even resentment at the Grounders
for having lived for generations on Earth without the Arkers' knowledge - free to roam the lands and
feel the warm sunlight on their faces, the rain on their skin.

She could only hope that it wouldn't escalate to hatred.

Knowing her people as she did, though, Clarke was sure that the escalation from fear to something
much more dangerous was a grave possibility.

She cleared her throat, having gotten lost in her train of thought as Lexa stared at her, waiting.

"I...can't be sure, really," she said quietly, almost apologetically. "I know the ultimate goal is to bring
everyone to the ground. You see, the Ark is dying, Commander. It wasn't meant to be in orbit for as
long as it has been. It can't sustain our population anymore, and our leaders are getting desperate."Clarke shifted a bit, slightly uncomfortable under Lexa's intense stare.

"I guess that's why they took me out of solitary so many months before my sentence was up. They
needed someone to get down here, and all the other plans seemed a little too complicated to follow
through with." Clarke shrugged.

"I'm not complaining, though. If it hadn't been for their desperation, I wouldn't be on the ground right
now. Although, I could probably do without the bum leg and the broken arm - but that's alright." She
smirked at the Commander.

Lexa considered her words as she continued to twirl the knife around. Her expression was calm as
ever, but her eyes were now alight with a quiet intelligence that Clarke immediately took note of.

The girl appeared to be thinking of every possible scenario just as Clarke had done, considering all
the things that could go wrong - all the lives that could be lost.
She looked away from Clarke, her gaze now exceptionally far away.

Clarke took the moment to adjust her legs a bit, moving her left leg to support her weight better as she kept her right leg slightly bent in front of her. She wanted to lay down on the fur, but she figured that might be a bit rude given her current circumstance.

Finally, Lexa seemed to come out of her revery.

"Do you have a time frame for this so-called 'mission?" she asked, voice even.

Clarke nodded.

"Yes. Two months. I have two months to determine whether or not the ground is safe. I'm assuming that goes beyond my initial contact with them, seeing as they expected me to radio back immediately, anyways. I guess they were giving me plenty of room for error," she noted humorlessly.

"If I don't establish some sort of contact by that time, though, they'll kill the other 98 prisoners they've detained. A bunch of kids." Clarke's voice wavered at that, disgust coloring her tone.

Lexa's eyebrows raised minutely in her expression, but she maintained her stoicism otherwise. She stopped the movement of the knife, placing it in her lap.

"Then we do not need to act immediately. Doing so might prevent the best course of action from being taken, and I will not put my people at such a risk," she said, voice taking on more authority now. "I will send warriors to collect this radio you speak of and have it brought to me. I will keep it safely in my quarters until I decide a further course of action." She stood now, slowly descending the steps to stand before Clarke.

She looked down at the girl with that same quiet intensity Clarke had seen before, seeming to take in every detail of the face staring up at her.

"In the mean time, you will be granted a healer to assist you with your injuries. When you have gathered your strength a bit more, you will accompany me back to the capitol to continue our negotiations. There, I will determine your people's fate." She spoke with such finality that Clarke
knew she had no chance to argue.

She probably wouldn't have, regardless. Lexa seemed to be giving her a pretty generous deal, from what she could discern.

She had to take what she could get.

"That works for me, I guess," she shrugged, the motion far less painful now that her arm was wrapped so tightly.

"Thank you, Commander." Her voice came out a sincere whisper, and she couldn't help the tears that threatened to spill over once again.

She was so exhausted.

The Commander swallowed, seemingly struggling to maintain her stoic mask for a moment. Clarke couldn't figure out why.

"You are welcome, Clarke of the Sky." Her voice was nearly a whisper now too, an undercurrent of feeling present.

She looked away from Clarke then, throat working as she did so. She called to the guards outside the tent.

"You will prepare a tent for Clarke Kom Skaikru. She is to have a guard with her at all times," she told them in English, tone hard. The Commander met their gaze heavily, her demeanor completely authoritative now.

"When that is finished, fetch Nyko and bring him to me. He will be assisting the Sky Girl with her recovery in the coming days."

"Sha, Heda," Clarke heard the guards voice in unison. They quickly strode from the tent to complete their given tasks.
Lexa looked back down to Clarke again.

"You will no longer be considered a prisoner in the eyes of my people," she informed the blonde steadily. "However, you are still my prisoner, and thus you will behave as such." Lexa spoke gravely now, enunciating every syllable carefully so as to ensure that Clarke understood the importance of her words.

"You may not roam through the village unless you are accompanied by either myself, your healer, or one of the guards I assign to you. In fact, you will go no where unsupervised. You will carry no weapons, and you will take nothing that is not freely given to you. You will speak to no one of your home, tell no one of your mission. We do not need any more rumors spreading throughout the clans." She stood up impossibly straighter and placed her hand atop the knife handle on her belt.

"Failing to follow these rules and behave appropriately will earn you a punishment by my hand. If you are smart, you will avoid that at all costs. Have I made myself clear, Clarke?"

Lexa's eyes were burning so intensely into Clarke's now that she felt the need to look away, maybe steady her breathing, as well.

She didn't, though, steeling herself before she responded.

"Yes, Commander. Crystal," she replied firmly.

Lexa narrowed her eyes a little at the saying, but eventually nodded her head in acceptance.

They continued to stare into each other's eyes for another moment before they were interrupted by the guards re-entering the tent. They said something in their language to Lexa, presumably informing the Commander that their tasks had been completed. She nodded once, dismissing them swiftly.

Without warning, Lexa stepped around so that she was at Clarke's left side and bent to scoop the girl into her arms. Clarke yelped in surprise as she was settled gently into the Commander's strong grasp, cradled bridal-style against her frame with Clarke's injured side slightly elevated. She didn't meet Clarke's widened eyes as she turned on her heels to exit the tent.

When they emerged on the other side, Clarke's attention was immediately taken by her surroundings.
It was dark save for two torches burning on the outside of the tent's entrance, lighting a path straight ahead of them. They were surrounded by tents and a few small huts beyond what appeared to be the center of the village. Clarke couldn't make out many details in the dim light, but she thought she saw the outlines of what appeared to be some sort of marketplace directly ahead of them to the right. There was a large gathering place to their left, sectioned off by benches positioned in a circle.

The guards who had been stationed outside the tent moved to stand behind Lexa as she addressed the growing crowd in front of her. People were spilling out of their tents now, apparently having waited up for their Commander.

Clarke felt Lexa shift her in her arms a bit as she addressed her people, speaking to them in the language still so unfamiliar to Clarke, her tone every bit as commanding as her demeanor.

They seemed to latch onto every word she said, occasionally throwing curious - if not somewhat hostile - glances at Clarke as she went on. As Lexa spoke, though, they seemed to grow more and more content, looking almost smug as they regarded Clarke.

Clarke wished with every fiber of her being that she knew what was being said.

After an impassioned speech, Lexa dispersed the crowd and they proceeded to file back into their homes.

When the square finally cleared, Lexa began walking once more. Clarke looked up at the Commander and took note of her expressionless features. She wondered if the Commander was always this composed.

After staring at the girl's hardened jawline for a few more moments, Clarke decided that she probably had to be. How else would Lexa be taken seriously by so many warriors? She got the sense that they respected strength above all else, which, in turn, meant that anything other than utter and complete composure equated to weakness. Perhaps they considered emotional displays to be signs of weakness, as well.

Clarke believed that to be the furthest thing from the truth, though.

The fluid movement of Lexa's gracefully silent steps began to lull Clarke into a state of calm, and she felt her eyes slowly closing.
Although Clarke figured the Commander was only carrying Clarke as a show of possessiveness over her prisoner - her address to the villagers had confirmed as much in Clarke's mind - she was still comforted by the other girl's embrace. It was strong and steady, both gentle and firm at the same time.

Clarke realized absently that she actually felt somewhat safe with the intimidating Commander already. She had no reason to feel so, really, but the small gestures of genuine kindness that Lexa had shown her so far led her to believe that the girl probably couldn't be that bad.

Trustworthy, even.

Of course, she would have to give it more time to make an accurate assessment of the Commander. For now, though, Clarke was content to give Lexa the benefit of the doubt - despite her initial ruse. Besides, she didn't seem to have any other choice but to trust the girl, as she was now apparently the Commander's personal "prisoner."

As Clarke found herself on the brink of falling into a deep sleep, she felt Lexa come to a sudden stop. She didn't open her eyes, though, figuring it might be easier if she just pretended to be completely asleep at this point.

She felt herself being lowered slowly onto a bed of thick furs, and she couldn't help the contented sigh that escaped her lips as Lexa settled her down gently.

She still couldn't figure out why the Commander was being so gentle with her - or treating her with such kindness - but she wouldn't dare complain. Lexa probably had her reasons, most likely backed by some sort of political agenda. Clarke couldn't figure out what that agenda could possibly be, though. Provide a warm reception for the Sky Girl so that she was less likely to bring the wrath of her people down on the Grounders, perhaps?

Maybe.

Who knows, though? Clarke couldn't be bothered to dwell on it as she drifted further into sleep.

Lexa continued to stand over her for a moment. Then, without a word, she turned swiftly and exited the tent.
Clarke felt herself drift off as soon as Lexa was gone.

Right before Clarke had fallen into that deep sleep, though, she could've sworn she'd felt the lightest of touches to the top of her head. It was gone before Clarke could even begin to process it, so she quickly passed it off as a figment of her imagination.

What a strange trick for her mind to play.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you again to anyone who has left a comment and/or kudos!! Your kindness has been endlessly wonderful.

Things are just getting started(;
Clarke was awakened by a blinding ray of sunlight hitting her directly in the face. She groaned dramatically, moving her left arm up to cover her eyes.

She heard someone enter her tent with a swish.

"It is time to rise, Clarke Kom Skaikru. You have slept half the day away." The Commander's voice spoke from just inside the entrance of the tent.

Clarke moved her arm a little, blinking one eye open to glare at the girl.

Lexa regarded her with a raised eyebrow in an otherwise stoic expression.

She wore the same outfit as the night before, war paint starkly standing out against her sun-kissed skin. She had her arms clasped behind her back and if Clarke didn't know any better, she would swear the girl looked somewhat impatient.
"What time is it?" Clarke grumbled, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes.

"Time for you join the world of the living, Clarke."

Clarke opened both eyes to glare more obviously at the Commander now.

"My body is healing, Commander. It needs rest," she yawned, stretching her left arm above her head.

"Besides," she continued, her voice slightly teasing now, "I value my beauty sleep above all else. It was truly lacking in solitary confinement, lemme tell ya."

Lexa narrowed her eyes, seemingly unamused—although, if Clarke wasn't mistaken, she noticed a slight twitch at the corner of the girl's mouth.

"If sleeping for 14 candle marks constitutes 'beauty sleep,' I believe I can do without it," Lexa countered evenly.

"You don't need it, anyways," Clarke responded before she could think.

She felt a flush color her cheeks immediately and winced in her embarrassment. She mentally scolded herself for being such a dumbass.

What was she thinking?! This was the Commander for god's sake, not some random chick on the Ark. She couldn't afford to absentmindedly flirt with someone who could feasibly have her tongue removed in under a minute for doing so. She needed to show some respect, just as Anya said.

There were too many things at stake for her to forget where she was or who she was dealing with.

Clarke saw Lexa's eyes widen slightly at the comment, presumably taken by surprise. She swallowed noticeably, seeming not to know what to make of it.

Before she had the chance to respond, though, Anya burst into the tent and nearly knocked into
Lexa's frozen frame before coming to a stop. She confusedly gawked at the back of Lexa's head for a moment before shaking it off.

"Heda, Nyko bade me to tell you that he is ready to see the skai gada now," she informed Lexa, her tone somewhat irritated. Lexa nodded curtly, eyes not leaving Clarke.

"Mochof, Anya. Return and tell him that Clarke Kom Skaikru will be there shortly." She dismissed Anya with a wave of her hand.

Anya rolled her eyes in annoyance at having been made a messenger, but complied and swiftly exited the tent. Not before she managed to shoot a fiery glare in Clarke's direction, though.

They'd definitely gotten off on the wrong foot somehow.

Lexa cleared her throat, blinking at Clarke.

"A meal is waiting for you in your healer, Nyko's, tent. His assistants will also help you bathe and change into a set of clothes that have been so generously provided to you by a villager." She spoke in that same commanding tone, addressing Clarke as if she was one of her many subjects.

"Are you ready?" She looked expectantly at Clarke.

Clarke nodded, using her left arm to push herself slowly into a sitting position.

Upon seeing Clarke struggle, Lexa hastily moved to the side of the bed. Her brows were furrowed, her eyes silently asking for permission. Clarke nodded gratefully.

Lexa immediately bent to slide one arm around Clarke's back and the other underneath her bent knees, grabbing gently onto Clarke's good side for leverage as she hoisted her into her arms.

When Clarke's leg accidentally bumped against Lexa's frame, the blonde hissed at the sudden pain it caused.
Lexa froze instantly, eyes searching Clarke's face. Clarke just nodded at the Commander, urging her to continue on.

The Commander carried her out of the tent without another word.

Clarke tried not to think about the slight concern she thought she'd seen in Lexa's eyes when the Commander thought she'd hurt her.

Hours later, Clarke sat in a wooden chair in Nyko's tent attempting to catch her breath somehow.

The healer had spent the past couple of hours giving her exercise after exercise in order to make use of her injured leg. The exercises were intended to centralize the pain back into her lower back, an area much more easily treated than the entire right side of her body. They were exhausting, though, and Clarke found herself having to stop and rest quite often with the exertion. Her soft muscles weren't used to such strain after the time spent in solitary - and in space, in general.

The environment hadn't been conducive to developing much strong muscle.

Nyko was incredibly patient with her, though.

The healer, though intimating at first glance with his long beard, tattoos, and incredibly large stature, turned out to be somewhat of a gentle giant. His demeanor reminded Clarke of that of the old woman's who had cared for her the night before, and it made Clarke much more willing to follow his instructions.

Their lunch had been filled with quiet small talk and Clarke had just been pleased he seemed to be so fluent in English. Afterwards, his two young female assistants had carefully stripped Clarke of her filthy Ark uniform to bath and wash her hair gently.

Due to their unimposing demeanor, Clarke hadn't felt the least bit shy or intimidated at the thought of
being naked in front of them. It felt like they were just doing their job in the most helpful way possible - nothing more, nothing less.

Then, she’d been dressed in a simple, sleeveless grey tunic that hung loosely off her shoulders accompanied by a pair of tight black pants that clung to her curves flatteringly. The assistants then braided Clarke's hair into a style that met at the back of her head but fell loosely onto her shoulders in waves.

She wished she could see her reflection.

She was covered in a sheen of sweat now, gasping for breath as Nyko hovered over her.

He seemed to take note of every response she had to the various exercises, adjusting the activities to the level at which she could reasonably complete the tasks. Despite the fact that she continued to struggle, Clarke was grateful for his attentiveness.

"I think it is a good time to stop for the day. I will give you something to ease your pain for the remainder of the night," Nyko told Clarke, looking down at her with kind eyes.

Clarke simply nodded, unable to speak at the moment.

"You will, no doubt, be sore for many days to come, but I have been greatly impressed by your pain tolerance, thus far. I expect you to make a full recovery in time," he said with a small smile now.

"I can take you on a little tour of the village now, if you would like?"

Clarke smiled warmly at his offer and nodded her head vigorously.

"I would love that, Nyko, thank you," she told him sincerely. He seemed incredibly pleased with her response.

Nyko then moved around her left side and bent so that Clarke could lace her good arm around his neck before hoisting her up.
The two of them exited the tent in a comfortable silence.

Leaves crunched beneath Nyko's feet as he carried Clarke through the forest.

After they'd taken a tour of the village - TonDC, as he'd called it - in its entirety, Clarke had begged him to take her to a place where she could get a clear view of the setting sun. After a moment of silent consideration, he had reluctantly agreed with a quick glance around the bustling village.

As they walked, she realized that he was probably looking for Lexa or one of her warriors. She hadn't seen the Commander since the girl had brought her to Nyko's tent earlier in the afternoon, letting them know that she might check in periodically to gauge Clarke's progress.

She hadn't, though, and Clarke found she'd felt a little pang of disappointment. She wanted to prove to the Commander that she wasn't the weakling she probably presumed Clarke to be at this point. She needed the girl to know that she could be useful.

Clarke supposed she would just have to prove it to the girl in time.

They had been walking for quite some time now, and Clarke began to fear she was going to miss another sunset. She hadn't properly seen one since she'd arrived on earth - either having slept through them or having been hidden away in one room or another - and she was determined to make an occasion out of it.

Upon hearing Clarke's stomach growl, Nyko had purchased some food at the crowded marketplace for them to eat while they watched the sunset. It would be Clarke’s first-ever picnic, and her heart fluttered in excitement at the prospect.
Nyko finally stopped when the forest came to an abrupt end at some sort of drop-off marked by a scattering of large boulders along the edge. He placed Clarke down gently and began unloading the pack of food for the two of them.

Clarke was delighted to see that the sun was just beginning its descent, in perfect view directly in front of her. She scooted to the edge of the rock Nyko had placed her on and looked down.

She gasped at the sight before her.

Off the face of the cliff and in every direction she could see was an endless stretch of green forest. She saw snow-topped mountains peaking off far in the distance, standing out against the skyline more beautifully than any picture she'd ever seen had depicted.

She promised herself that she would return to this spot with her sketchbook eventually - whenever it was returned to her, that is.

She retreated from the edge a bit but stayed facing the outlook as Nyko settled down beside her. He handed her a water skin and a slice of bread.

"I am curious; what does a sunset look like from up in the sky?" he questioned her, voice slightly reverent. Clarke turned and smiled sweetly at him.

"Well, truth be told, I never actually saw the sun that often in the first place. My home was on a part of the Ark that faced away from the sun, and we never usually orbited to a place where I could see it well enough. I did have to participate in a lot of sun flare drills, though." She continued to smile at him. He met her gaze with an awed smile of his own.

Clarke's smile faltered a little as she remembered something.

"Was I not supposed to tell you that? The Commander told me not to speak about my past to anyone..." she frowned at the memory.

"I have already been informed about your...situation," Nyko replied carefully. "I do not believe that the information you just told me will be used against you in any way. Do not be afraid, skai prisa. You are safe with us," he assured her confidently.
She smiled gratefully before freezing suddenly. He called her skai prisa.

"Wait a minute, what did you call me? The only other person who called me that was..." she trailed off, not sure how much she wanted to say. Nyko looked uncomfortable all of a sudden.

"Skai prisa translates to 'Sky Princess' in Gonasleng. I may have...picked up the term from the children," he finished quietly. Clarke furrowed her brows.

"Wait, you mean Belou and Zenya? They live in TonDC?" she questioned him, voice quavering a little. "What about - do you know -" she swallowed, trying to find her words.

"Lincoln. Is he in TonDC? Is he alright? What happened to him?" Stress noticeably seeped into her voice then.

Nyko looked even more uncomfortable now, but he nodded.

"Yes, they all live in the village - though Lincoln is somewhat more of a wanderer. He has never much enjoyed the life of a warrior." Nyko shook his head a little, slightly disgruntled. "The children came to him first with news of your arrival, and he came to me after the first time he saw you. I gifted him the syrup for your pain, as well as the sling. He tried to keep your arrival a secret, but Belou kept going on about his beautiful skai prisa to the rest of the village." Nyko huffed, annoyed yet slightly affectionate at the thought of the little boy.

Clarke flushed at having been called beautiful so casually, as if it was a widely-accepted fact.

"Before long, the entire village was whispering about rumors of a princess from the sky having come down in a ring of fire. Indra, our village's leader and a General in the Commander's army, sent word to Polis of these rumors. Heda sent her confidante ahead to follow Lincoln's movements, and you were discovered soon after that." Nyko sighed, taking a swig of water from the skin. Clarke waited.

"Lincoln is fine, so to speak. He has been detained by the Commander for further questioning. She has to ensure his loyalty, as well as his discretion with such an...important...bit of information."

Clarke looked away from him, watching as the sun descended further towards the mountains. She
felt a weight lifted off of her shoulders at the news that Lincoln was relatively okay for now.

"Thank you for telling me, Nyko," she told the man sincerely. "Lincoln saved my life and was nothing but kind to me. I owe him more than just my life, really." She swallowed against her emotions now.

They seemed to be right underneath the surface lately - most likely a by-product of the unfamiliar situation and the constant pain and loneliness that constricted her throat. Hopefully she would learn to reign them in a little better, eventually.

"Of course. If you do not wish for me to call you by that name, though, please do not hesitate to tell me," he told her earnestly. She smiled gently at him.

"Nah, it's alright. It sounds kinda cool in your language, actually." She shrugged.

"Which leads me to a couple questions, as a matter of fact. First of all, what's it actually called? I keep thinking of it as 'the language' in my head, and I'd like to have a proper name for it." Nyko smirked at her.

"Trigedasleng."

Clarke quirked an eyebrow.

"Well, that's a mouthful. Thanks for telling me, though." Nyko continued to smirk at her.

"Second of all, why do so many of you speak English so well? And how do you decide who gets to learn it?"

"English - or Gonasleng, as we call it - is taught only to warriors and some select healers," he informed her matter-of-factly. "Heda and her advisors are the most fluent, of course." Clarke nodded, completely fascinated.

The sun continued to set beautifully before them, and Clarke committed the perfect smearing of oranges, pinks and purples to memory.

"So, is the Commander in charge of everyone, or - ?" she trailed off, unsure of where she was going.
"Sha," Nyko nodded. "She rules over all 12 of our clans. She was the first Commander to ever unite us in such a way, and her rule has been incredibly beneficial for all of our people." He spoke reverently now, clearly in awe of his Commander.

"She is a visionary, and, despite certain...obstacles..., has managed to do more good in the few years of her rule than probably all of the past Commanders combined. Our Heda is truly special."

Clarke hung on his every word, absorbing the information like a sponge. She was finally getting some insight into the Grounders' culture, and she felt desperate with the need for more.

"Obstacles?" Clarke questioned, having gotten hung up on that particular detail. "What do you mean?"

Nyko shifted, suddenly looking uncomfortable once again.

"I am...not sure it is my place to say. I am sorry, skai prisa." He sounded truly apologetic, so Clarke decided not to press him despite being horribly curious now.

She supposed it would have to wait until another time.

They settled into another comfortable silence as the sun fell down behind the mountains. Clarke felt an overwhelming warmth in her chest at having witnessed the glorious sunset. She swore to herself that it would be the first of many.

As the moon moved to replace the sun, Nyko grew noticeably restless beside her.

"I believe it is time to go back now," was all he said as he secured the bag back in place over his shoulder and scooped Clarke back up into his arms.

She took one last look over her shoulder as they re-entered the forest, locking the place away in a special part of her heart.
Clarke knew something was wrong the second they stepped back into the boundary of TonDC. Beyond the fact that Nyko noticeably stiffened at the sound of voices shouting in the distance, Clarke could feel the tension in the air as they made their way back to the center of the village. She didn’t know what had happened but, regardless, it caused her heart rate to speed up considerably.

As they neared the center, the villagers scurrying about - seeming to have been searching for something - came to a sudden stop and stared at them as they passed. They all eyed Clarke with either contempt or something else she couldn't quite place, and she found herself shrinking further into Nyko's hold.

Upon reaching the center of the village, Clarke saw Indra instantly lock her eyes onto the two approaching figures. She had been the only one standing in front of what Clarke presumed to be the Commander's tent, darting her eyes quickly about with her hand resting on the hilt of her sword. She snarled upon seeing them.

"Heda!" she yelled into the tent, "They have returned!" She shot a seething glare in their direction and Clarke cowered a little.

Nyko seemed to be bracing himself for something, nervously shifting his feet beneath them.

Clarke understood the reason for his nerves almost immediately.

Not two seconds after Indra had called into the tent, Lexa came storming out in a blaze of fury so intense Clarke could feel it hit her from where she cowered in Nyko's grasp. Her hand was closed around the hilt of the sword at her hip, and she closed the distance between her tent and Nyko with only a couple of long strides.

The villagers now lingered at the entrances to their homes, terrified yet fascinated by the sight
unfolding in front of them.

When the Commander stopped abruptly two feet from where Clarke rested against Nyko's chest, Clarke decided to chance a look at the girl's face.

She shouldn't have.

Lexa's expression was contorted in one of a kind of fury Clarke wouldn't have believed existed, let alone appeared on the other girl's features. Her green eyes were alight with such burning rage against her war paint that Clarke believed for a second that it might actually be possible for the Commander to shoot fire from her eyes. If anyone was capable of doing such a thing, Lexa surely would've been able to at that moment.

Her teeth were barred and her nostrils flared against the harsh breaths she was taking. The hand not resting on the hilt of her sword was balled into a white-knuckled fist at her side. Her posture was rigid.

"What were you *thinking*, healer?!" she seethed, voice menacingly low and practically a growl. "Running off with my prisoner without so much as a word of your intended location?"

Clarke thought she felt Nyko trembling against her.

"Are you aware of the severity of your mistake, healer? *Ron ai ridyio op!*" Lexa demanded, glaring brutally into Nyko's eyes. She had yet to look at Clarke, and the blonde continued to glance at the infuriated Commander from the corner of her eyes. She couldn't chance more than that.

She felt Nyko swallow thickly as if he had a rock stuck in his throat. His hands shook where they grasped her, his body trembling even more noticeably now.

"I-I..." he stuttered, mouth clasping shut under the penetrating glare Lexa continued to bore into him. She put her fist on her hip and adjusted her stance to one of haughty impatience.

After what felt like hours of Nyko attempting to speak and failing miserably, Clarke finally decided to reprieve him.

"I-it was my fault, Commander," she spoke up sheepishly, tentatively turning her head to meet
Lexa's glare.

The Commander's eyes immediately snapped to meet Clarke's for the first time, and the blonde blanched for moment at the look now directed at her. She took a steadying breath.

"I...asked him if he would take me to go see the sunset," Clarke was nearly whispering now. "I had never seen one before, and I was desperate to go since it'd been such a gorgeous day. I practically begged Nyko to take me, and I convinced him that we needed to go right away so that we didn't miss it. He was only doing as I asked, and I don't deserve his kindness. I'm sorry, Commander."

Clarke's eyes were watering now, her tone quietly desperate and pleading.

Lexa's eyes widened for a moment before her expression softened ever-so-slightly. Her fist fell away from her hip and unclenched at her side, twitching a little bit. It seemed as if her entire body noticeably relaxed at Clarke's words.

Make no mistake, she was still infuriated - desperately so. But the blaze within her eyes was muted slightly at Clarke's words, placated for the moment.

If Clarke hadn't known any better, she might've even said the Commander appeared the slightest bit guilty all of a sudden. It flashed for the briefest of seconds in her eyes before her entire face smoothed back into the mask of stoicism.

She looked away from Clarke and back to Nyko, raising her chin slightly as she did so.

"Is this true, healer?" she asked him, anger still very evident in her tone. He shifted Clarke slightly.

"Sh-sha, Heda. It is. We followed the sun." His voice shook noticeably as he spoke, and Clarke felt her heart pang for him.

He didn't deserve to be suffering on her behalf like this.

Lexa nodded once, clenching and un-clenching her jaw, mouth forming a hard line. She closed her eyes for a moment before opening them again to reveal her now fully-composed features.
She clasped her arms behind her back.

"Very well. This incident will be excused for now," she informed him, voice flat and cool. "However, if you fail to inform me of your plans with my prisoner a second time, you will be subject to a lashing at my hand. Is that clear?" Nyko nodded all-too-eagerly. Lexa nodded once in return.

"Very well. Expect me to keep a much more watchful eye on the two of you from now on," she warned him coldly.

Clarke didn't appreciate being referred to as a prisoner so often, but she supposed she had to let it go considering Nyko was getting off relatively easily.

She felt him nearly slump as the weight was removed from his shoulders.

Without warning, Clarke felt herself being placed into Lexa's waiting arms. She didn't even have a chance to wish Nyko goodnight as the Commander turned from him and walked briskly to Clarke's tent.

Lexa strode in and stopped abruptly at the side of Clarke's bed. She half-expected to be thrown into the furs.

To her surprise, though, she was once again lowered slowly and gently onto the soft bed.

Lexa looked down at her with an unreadable expression, mouth forming into a hard line.

"Have you eaten?" she prompted quietly. Clarke nodded eagerly in response.

Lexa closed her eyes again for a brief moment.

"Very well. I suppose...I will let you rest now." She gazed down at Clarke with thoughtful green eyes. Her expression remained otherwise unreadable.
She nodded once more and turned on her heels, making for the exit of the tent. Before she got there, though, Clarke spoke up.

"Le-Commander, wait," she began, swallowing against her slip up. Lexa stopped abruptly, turning to face Clarke again, apparently not having noticed the mistake. Or perhaps she couldn't be bothered to correct the blonde at the moment.

"I'm sorry...for angering you today. I didn't mean to cause you so much trouble. I won't do it again," she promised, tone firm.

Lexa seemed troubled by her apology for some reason.

"You...did nothing wrong, but I appreciate your apology," she said evenly, her voice quiet. "Rest now, Clarke of the Sky People. You have another long day ahead of you. And I will not let you sleep halfway through it this time."

With that, Lexa turned and strode out of the tent.

Clarke found herself drifting off to a dreamless sleep not long after that.

For the next ten days after the "incident," Lexa proved to be true to her word.

She kept Clarke in her periphery almost constantly, escorting the blonde everywhere without so much as a word.
When Clarke was with Nyko, Lexa remained a quiet presence in the corner of the tent, following silently behind if they made to exit the tent for any reason or complete some of the exercises outside.

She watched the two of them work with an attentive eye, seeming to take notice of every ounce of progress Clarke made. The only time her watch would be interrupted was when Anya, Indra, or Gustus would approach her and whisper quietly to her about one thing or another. She was quick to end whatever discussion was being had and dismiss them with the wave of her hand.

At the end of every session with the healer, the Commander would scoop Clarke into her arms and take her back to her tent for the meal that was almost always waiting for her on the small wooden table by her bedside. While Clarke ate, the Commander would slip out of the tent and attend to any business she had been neglecting during the day. She often left Clarke alone after that - though Clarke knew she wasn't truly alone due to the obvious presence of the two guards posted outside of her tent.

The Commander only addressed her twice a day - once in the morning when waking her up, and once when she dropped her back at her tent, wishing her a good evening. Clarke didn't think too much about their interactions, figuring the Commander was already being exceptionally generous to give her such kind treatment in the first place. The occasional glares she would catch from the Commander's three closest warriors told her as much.

She often had to bite down against the desire to ask Lexa about herself, to learn something - anything - about the mysterious girl who had fooled her so thoroughly. She was intrigued by her, but Clarke knew she had to focus on the more pressing manner at hand: make sure she maintained a civil relationship with the Commander long enough to get to that damn radio.

The rest would have to come later.

Beyond that, Clarke began to find comfort in this newly-established routine: she would be woken up by the stoic Commander every morning after first light and taken to Nyko's tent where she would eat breakfast before his assistants would bathe and dress her (while Lexa ushered Nyko out of the tent to discuss Clarke's "progress" every morning without fail). Then, she and Nyko would work tirelessly on her exercises until sundown - only ever breaking for a light lunch -, followed by Lexa taking her back to her tent for a final meal and some down-time.

She often found her mind drifting to her people and the mission she'd been given, but she knew she couldn't press the Commander to make a decision right now. They both still seemed to be finding a pace at which to best chart this unknown territory, and she didn't want to force Lexa's hand in any way. She needed to be patient.
She needed to make sure she got to the capitol - Polis, she remembered Nyko calling it.

For lack of anything better to do, Clarke would usually just go straight to bed after she finished eating. She didn't care how early it was; she was always exhausted after the day's activities and her body was more than willing to cooperate with her desire to rest. She even wore herself out enough that the nightmares stayed away for a time.

Until the tenth day, that is.

It went the same as usual - Clarke and Nyko carrying out their exercises under Lexa's watchful eye, the healer bidding Clarke a good night as the Commander carrying her out of his tent.

She ate her dinner in silence, then lay back in her bed of furs and closed her eyes.

What felt like mere minutes later, Clarke found herself back on the Ark. Enveloped in her recurring nightmare once again.

She was alone, standing in the corridor leading to doors that had haunted her dreams for the past three months, plus. The doors that had separated her from her father one last time.

She moved towards the doors, knowing her nightmare wouldn't end until she did so. As she walked, she was immediately engulfed in the same crippling dread that always gripped her heart when she thought of this place. She felt her breathing become erratic, and she knew it couldn't be healthy for her heart to be pounding so hard in her chest. Blood pounded in her ears, threatening to deafen her.

She stopped in front of the doors and placed her hands on the glass.

The containment box was empty.

That was unusual. Her father was usually waiting to put his hands up to hers through the glass. It was always just the two of them alone.
Clarke was always the one to float him.

Suddenly, her vision blurred a bit and she found herself standing on the other side of the doors now. She looked around at the containment box, utterly confused.

Then, appearing out of nowhere like an apparition, her mother came to stand before her - where Clarke normally stood.

Clarke felt her heart plummet.

"Mom?" she asked, sounding completely unlike herself. Her voice was too thick.

"Hi, sweetheart," her mom replied, placing a hand on the glass. Clarke hesitantly raised hers to meet it.

"Hi, sweetheart," her mom replied, placing a hand on the glass. Clarke hesitantly raised hers to meet it.

"Wha-what's going on?" Clarke stammered, voice still too strange.

Abby Griffin regarded her with a sad smile, face otherwise expressionless.

"You failed us, Clarke. It's all your fault." Her mother's voice was flat, devoid of all emotion.

Clarke gulped, shaking her head furiously.

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"Mom, no. Please. I don't understand -" her voice broke, throat closing painfully around the words.

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This couldn't be happening.

"You failed us," her mother repeated, turning from Clarke and walking over to the control panel on the side of the wall.

"You failed us," her mother repeated, turning from Clarke and walking over to the control panel on the side of the wall.

No. No, no, no, no, no.
"Our blood is on your hands."

Her mom pressed the button.

Clarke screamed felt the crushing force of a thousand tons sucking her back into space. It felt as if her chest had collapsed on itself, her heart fighting against the pressure to keep beating, breath ripping from her lungs.

She opened her mouth to scream only to be strangled by the lack of oxygen.

Everything went black.

*Her fault.*

"Clarke. Clarke! Wake up, Clarke. Wake up!" A voice was calling to her. Shaking her.

"Come back, Clarke. Clarke!"

Clarke sat up in her bed as if the force of a whip had cracked against her spine, a strangled scream tearing from her throat.

She blinked her eyes open frantically, breathing erratically as her eyes settled on the person sitting on the edge of the bed, gripping her tightly around both shoulders.

Lexa.

The Commander sat wide-eyed before her, face alight with a depth of concern Clarke had never seen before. Her eyes darted along Clarke's face as if she was trying to scan it for any signs of pain or distress.

If Clarke's eyes weren't playing tricks on her, it almost seemed as if the girl before her looked something close to *helpless.*
"Clarke, just breath. You're okay. You're safe," Lexa nearly cooed to the panicked girl before her. Her grip let up a little on Clarke's injured arm, moving to rest gently on the blonde's shoulder.

Clarke had never heard such gentleness in the Commander's voice before. It was as jarring as it was comforting.

"You need to breath, Clarke. Here," she said, taking Clarke's left hand in hers and placing it near her heart. Green eyes locked onto blue, encouraging and intense. "Focus on my breathing. Follow me."

Lexa breathed in deeply, out slowly, and Clarke did her best to mimic the girl's movements.

Sweat continued to trickle down her face.

The Commander was still wearing her typical uniform - though her face was devoid of war paint, giving her a slightly more youthful appearance - so Clarke had absolutely no clue what time it was. Her eyes left Lexa's for a moment to land on the entrance of her tent. Anya and Gustus stood just outside the opening of the tent flap, bathed in moonlight with arms crossed, eyeing the scene before them in disapproval.

Clarke couldn't bear to look into their judgmental eyes for more than a second, instead coming back to focus on the concerned green ones in front of her.

Absently, Clarke became aware of her hand resting over the Commander's heart, wrapped in a much stronger one. Of the other more gentle hand resting on her shoulder.

Slowly but surely, her breathing began to steady. Her heart rate decreased to a more healthy beating, the sweat glistening on her skin slowly drying.

She closed her eyes for a moment.

"Wh-why are you here?" she asked Lexa, the question coming out more as a croak. She didn't open her eyes to gauge the Commander's expression.
She felt a little shift in the weight on the bed beside her.

"I was alerted that there were...screams...coming from your tent that were disturbing the villagers," Lexa's calm voice informed her, swallowing a little too loudly as she paused.

"I came as soon as I could."

Clarke nodded. Her hand still rested on Lexa's chest.

"Oh."

Her voice sounded incredibly weak in that moment.

She opened her eyes again to see Lexa staring at her, that same fierce concern mixing with something else Clarke couldn't quite read in her eyes. Her face was otherwise stoic, as usual.

Lexa seemed to remember something, averting her eyes from Clarke and shaking her head a little. She slowly removed Clarke's hand from her and placed it gently back in the blonde's lap. Her other hand fell from Clarke's shoulder as she rose from the bed, looking back to Clarke as she did so. Clarke adjusted her position so that her legs hung off the side of the bed.

"Do you - is this a normal occurrence? These...dreams? Like the other day in the cell?" The Commander seemed to be struggling to find the right words.

Clarke nodded.

For some reason, she suddenly felt the desire to be more honest with the girl standing above her than she had with anyone else who'd inquired after her nightmares in the past.

"Yes. I have them...frequently. I thought that since I'd been wearing myself out so much, then maybe they might've gone away for awhile. But, apparently, no such luck." She shrugged, eyes starting to water as she gazed down at her lap. She was too exhausted to hide her pained expression as tears began to fall.
"They're always the same. M-my father. Being killed right before my eyes. I -" she choked a little against the emotion straining in her throat. She swallowed, doing her best to continue as she looked at Lexa. "I'm always the one who does it. It's always me. This time, I was the one who got to die - at the hands of my own mother, no less." Clarke chuckled humorlessly. It turned into more of a whimper.

"I'm sorry I disturbed the villagers."

She didn't know why she'd chosen to confide in Lexa this way. It wasn't as if the Commander actually cared about her sob story of a life.

She was just being selfish taking up the girl's time in this way.

Suddenly, the Commander was crouching before her, wrapping both of Clarke's hands in her own. She was looking up into Clarke's eyes with so much unbridled concern that it was almost disarming. The concern warred heavily against some sort of raging inner conflict as Clarke hesitantly returned the gaze. The stoic mask had fallen away, leaving a startlingly intense Lexa kneeling before her.

Clarke didn't know what to make of it.

"You have nothing to apologize for, Clarke," the Commander implored passionately, holding Clarke's gaze with that same intensity. "We have no control over the things that haunt us in our dreams. We can only promise ourselves to continue to fight those demons when we wake. Those are the most important battles we can face in life. The moment we let our demons overcome us from within is the day that our fight will most certainly be over."

Her voice continued to rise in passion as she spoke, and Clarke found herself entranced by the words.

"Do not ever feel like an imposition for bringing that fight out for others to see, Clarke."

Clarke closed her eyes against the tears now freely falling. Lexa's hands twitched around her own, almost as if she wanted to move to comfort Clarke in some other way - perhaps by swiping the tears from her cheeks. She restrained herself, though.
"What can I do, Clarke?"

The question was so quiet, so kind, and Clarke was overwhelmed. She had no idea how to respond. What did she want from this girl whose longest interaction with her had been under false pretenses in a prison cell? More importantly, why was the Commander offering such a thing in the first place?

She opened her eyes and met Lexa's intense gaze as she responded.

"I'd like...to go for a walk, I think." Clarke's voice was thick with emotion as she responded, but she was simply happy she'd managed to say anything at all.

The Commander looked thrown for a moment, eyebrows shooting up in surprise before she schooled her expression completely and allowed her mask to fall back into place. The mask that was becoming the most constant feature on the girl's face.

Lexa nodded once, removing her hands from Clarke as she stood. Without a word, she bent to scoop Clarke into her arms.

"Wait!" Clarke stopped her, holding her good hand out in front of her. Lexa froze, looking confused.

Clarke cleared her throat.

"I'd like to try it on my own, I think. I've been making pretty good progress..." She trailed off at the instantly disapproving expression on the Commander's face. Lexa's brows furrowed as she straightened back up, placing her hands on her hips, clearly readying herself for argument.

"Clarke, no. You're not ready. It's only been a few days -"

"I'll never be ready if I don't push myself a little bit!" Clarke's tone shot up a few octaves at that.

Suddenly, Anya appeared just inside the tent, barring her teeth and growling in response to Clarke's tone with her hand twitching at the hilt of her sword. Lexa immediately held up her hand to halt the warrior's movements.
"Commander, with all due respect," Clarke began, glancing nervously at Anya, "I think I should try to walk a little by myself. I won't get any better if people keep carrying me everywhere." She flushed at that, moving her left hand up to cup the back of her neck and ducking her head slightly to stare at the floor.

She couldn't see Lexa's silent consideration before her. The tent was tense as both Clarke and Anya awaited her response - both for very different reasons, it seemed.

Then,

"Fine. I will allow it."

Both Clarke and Anya's disbelieving gazes locked onto Lexa.

"But the moment it becomes too much, you will be brought right back to this bed - no questions asked. Have I made myself clear?" Her voice was every bit the Commander now.

Clarke nodded vigorously, exceptionally grateful. Anya looked beyond displeased.

"Yes, of course, Commander! Thank you," Clarke smiled up at Lexa with as much gratitude as she could muster. The Commander pursed her lips a little, face unreadable as ever.

"I think I can manage with just one of the guards, if that's alright."

"No," Lexa cut her off immediately, tone firm. Clarke flinched a little, expecting retaliation.

To her never-ending surprise, the Commander spoke:

"You are my prisoner. I will escort you myself."
Chapter End Notes

Trigedasleng translation:
Ron ai ridyio op! - Tell me the truth!/Speak true!

For anyone who's curious, the reason I've been able to update so fast is because I had several chapters written before I first posted the story haha. I'm working on 9 right now (:)

I must say - 7, 8, & 9 are my favorite chapters that I've written thus far. I can't wait for you to read them!! (:}
For those curious about Lexa's motivations as to her possessiveness/reactions to Clarke so far:

As someone so dutifully pointed out in the comments, she's having to deal with the appearance of a ~literal~ alien at this point. She feels the need to make a show of strength/authority, if you will, so that her people don't start panicking and resorting to chaos in the wake of their newest arrival (which is what usually happens to human beings when faced with insurmountable fear and unknowns if history has anything to say for it). You've gotta remember - her people don't even respond well to modern technology, so, in the wake of a random space person crashing down in their territory, it only makes sense that she would do her best to shoulder the responsibility for said person and try to quell any fears that might arise. Fears that Anya, Indra, and Gustus are no more immune to than anyone else; it just so happens that their fear translates to something close to resentment and anger towards Clarke, as well as intense wariness, as opposed to shying away from her.

So, at this point, Lexa's mostly driven by her need to protect her people and her ultimate "political agenda" of keeping everyone united - although she's definitely having to deal with some intense (and innate) protectiveness towards Clarke that confuses her a bit when it gets mixed in there (;

Sorry for the love letter, but I hope that clears up some stuff. As for Lexa's POV, in general, it's very intentional that I'm keeping it somewhat of a secret (at least for now) as frustrated as that might make you haha. The only way we're going to figure out what she's thinking at this point in time is if our beloved Sky Princess does some digging, soooo hopefully you catch my drift there...(;

Otherwise, I hope you enjoy!! (: 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Clarke was seriously getting tired of being carried around everywhere.
Despite her adamant protests, Lexa had insisted on carrying her to the spot on the outskirts of the village that Clarke suggested. She didn't particularly enjoy the thought of being watched by the curious villagers whose interests would inevitably peak at the prospect of watching the Sky Girl stumble around.

She'd endured enough disgraceful embarrassment during The Commander's show of authority with her and Nyko a few days earlier.

Anya had trailed behind them, anger emanating off of her frame in waves, until Lexa finally shooed her away - much to the warrior's dismay, though she didn't protest. Clarke was grateful for it.

"You know, my ego has seriously been taking a hit these past few days being carried around like this all the time," Clarke teased, eyeing Lexa's profile from her spot against the girl's frame. Lexa didn't meet her gaze.

"I thought you said there were no egos allowed on your Ark," the Commander responded flatly, quick as a whip.

Damn. She really had been listening.

Clarke shook her head, impressed.

"Touché, Commander. Touché," Clarke responded, smirking. Lexa eyed her from her periphery, expression stoic as always.

After another moment, Lexa stopped.

They were standing a couple hundred yards inside the boundaries of the forest, bathed in the bright moonlight that broke through the trees all around them.

Lexa slowly set Clarke down on her feet, hands moving to support both of the blonde's shoulders from behind.

"Are sure you want to do this so soon?" Lexa asked from behind her, voice tinged with subtle
concern. Clarke nodded.

"Now's as good a time as any," she shrugged, tone casual. She felt more than saw Lexa nod behind her.

"Whenever you're ready," the Commander said quietly. "I will be right behind you."

Clarke rolled her shoulders back a little, straightening herself up in the attempts to brace against whatever pain was coming to her. She took a hesitant step forward with her right foot, placing it lightly on the ground. Lexa shifted uneasily behind her.

As soon as she put her weight on it, her right leg ached sharply in protest. Clarke hissed against the pain but refused to pick her foot back up. She needed to do this.

"Clarke?" Lexa's voice was uncertain.

Clarke shook her head, brushing the girl off.

"I'm fine. I can do this."

She moved her left leg up to be beside her right, immediately breaking into a cold sweat at the pain it was causing her. Her body began to tremble ever so slightly, sweat beading out on her forehead.

Lexa seemed to notice this, as she gave Clarke a small and encouraging squeeze on her shoulders.

She took another step, bracing herself better for the pain, and then another.

Slowly but surely, Clarke found herself adjusting to the familiar movement of walking again. All of her exercises had been done while she was either flat on the ground or sitting in a chair, so it seemed only natural that her body might struggle to re-discover the rhythm once again. Though it was exceptionally painful, Clarke was grateful that her limbs seemed to want to cooperate with her now. It made her extremely hopeful for a quicker recovery than she would've thought she'd have.
She felt her lips quirk up into a giddy smile.

Lexa remained close behind her the entire time, hands gripping firmly onto Clarke. Every once in awhile, she would mutter words of encouragement under her breath - words that would've been lost to the wind had the Commander not been standing so close.

As they ambled forwards, Clarke found herself lost in thought, mind wandering away from the pain for a moment.

Lexa was being so kind to her. Now that Clarke thought about it, she always had been. Wary, perhaps. Untrusting, certainly.

But always kind.

The Commander had a quiet sort of presence to her, yet she seemed to occupy the space around her with more confidence and strength than any other person Clarke had met. Those around her regarded her with more reverence than Clarke had ever seen in the eyes of any subjects on the Ark when they looked to their leader.

The Arkers respected Jaha, sure, but many often turned their eyes away from him whenever he entered the room, as if not meeting his gaze would allow them not to be seen.

The Grounders, on the other hand, seemed to snap to attention whenever Lexa was around, following every move she made with awe-struck expressions.

They looked to her for strength. For guidance. All seemingly willing to lay down their lives for her at a moment's notice. The Commander probably struck some sort of fear in their hearts, no doubt, but that fear sprung more from their not wanting to disobey or disappoint her than from actual fear of the woman, herself.

It was a beautiful sight to behold: a leader who actually inspired her people and gave them reason to follow her, gave them purpose, rather than one who led by fear-tactics alone. Clarke knew for a fact that the Arkers would never be inspired by Jaha in such a way - wouldn't die for him, either, if it came down to it.

Not unless they were forced to.
The fact that this all-powerful and highly-respected leader was regarding Clarke with such kindness stirred something within her that she couldn't even begin to express. It was so much more than gratitude.

The Commander had no reason to do so, either. She could've killed Clarke immediately - maybe after grilling her for information - and then destroyed the radio and any other evidence that suggested Clarke had ever landed on this planet, in the first place. That would've effectively delayed her people from coming down to the ground for an extended period of time - if not deter them completely.

Or the Commander could've just tortured her for days on end. Getting every ounce of information from Clarke until she could no longer stand it anymore, leaving her begging for death. Then, she could've locked her in a cell and thrown away the key. End of story.

But she hadn't done anything remotely close to that.

Instead, she'd gotten to know Clarke. She absorbed the bits and pieces she could glean from what Clarke would tell her, storing them away to inquire about in more detail at a later time, but she would never press for much.

She let Clarke rest. She fed her, gave her clothes and a comfortable place to sleep, and assigned a healer to help her with her injuries. She maintained a watchful eye over her at all times, though she made sure her presence was never threatening. She was always patient, as well.

Warmth swelled in Clarke's chest and, had Lexa been anyone other than the Commander of the 12 Clans, Clarke would've turned around right then and there and captured the girl in a thankful embrace.

As it were, though, she continued to limp forward in silent thanks to the girl holding firmly onto her shoulders, keeping her steady.

After a few paces, Clarke decided to break the silence.

"Do you get them, too?" Clarke asked softly, slightly hesitant. "Nightmares, I mean."
Lexa was silent.

Her steps made no sound behind Clarke, who suddenly wished she could see the girl's expression. She hoped she hadn't gone too far.

"Frequently, yes," Lexa answered finally, voice equally as soft.

Clarke nodded, empathy immediately coursing through her veins and coloring her expression - though Lexa couldn't see it.

"Ah. I figured as much," Clarke commented. "You seemed to know what you were talking about back there in the tent."

Lexa was quiet once again, seemingly contemplating how to respond. Clarke waited.

"It is...something I have come to accept in recent years," she admitted finally. "That our minds must find a way to cope with the carnage that life often leaves behind for us, I mean. Otherwise, we might not be able to move forward."

Clarke marveled at the wisdom of the Commander's words. She was right, of course. Our bodies had to figure out some way to protect us from everything life could throw at us. No matter what that meant for the soul living within its shell.

"I've found it's pretty hard to move forward when the same dream always keeps me up at night," Clarke mused thoughtfully, nearly whispering now.

"The one of your father?" Lexa asked, somewhat hesitantly. Her tone was one of polite interest, though there was an undercurrent to it that Clarke didn't quite understand.

Clarke nodded.

"Yes. Every time. Except for tonight, that is." She worked to keep the emotion out of her voice, though she knew she wouldn't be able to if she'd spoken above a whisper.
They had been slowly coming upon a clearing amongst the trees for some time now. The two came to a stop when they reached the edge of the forest.

Clarke looked over her shoulder at Lexa for the first time since they'd started walking. The Commander regarded her stoically, as usual.

"Could we sit for awhile? My leg's killing me but I don't think I'm ready to go back just yet..." she trailed off, suddenly unsure of herself.

Lexa simply nodded.

Clarke took a few steps into the clearing, pain wracking her body as sweat coated her skin. She was beyond-exhausted but determined to make it to the center of the clearing.

Lexa's grip was firmer on her now, guiding her forwards a little bit as she sensed Clarke's dwindling strength.

The two finally came to a stop at the center of the clearing, and Clarke would've been fine with collapsing gracelessly onto the ground had Lexa not guided her into a comfortable sitting position.

Clarke immediately flopped flat onto her back, staring up at the stars that dusted the night sky. It was a gorgeously clear night, not a single cloud visible anywhere near them. Clarke sighed contentedly, glancing towards the girl still standing over her in her periphery. Their gazes locked.

"Care to join me?" Clarke inquired, quirking a playful eyebrow at the stoic Commander above her.

Lexa narrowed her eyes, contemplating whether or not to dignify the inquiry with a response, before relenting. She gracefully sunk down into a sitting position a couple of feet to the left of where Clarke sprawled out.

Just as Clarke was about to close her eyes, she saw Lexa holding something out to her in her from the corner of her eye. She turned her head, taking in the sight of the water skin in Lexa's hand. Clarke had no idea where the girl had been hiding it, but she took it gratefully from her grasp, not bothering to sit up as she poured the contents into her mouth.
She coughed as the water hit her throat at weird angles, sputtering a little as she tried to catch her breath. Lexa had inched a little closer as she'd started choking, looking down at her with a raised eyebrow.

"That was unwise," she observed quietly. Clarke wiped her mouth off with her arm, holding the water skin out to the other girl with a glare.

"Yeah, well. We can't all be as wise as you, Commander," she quipped, not nearly as sarcastically as she'd intended. She bit her lip after the words left her, though, afraid of the girl's response to her disrespect.

Lexa simply huffed, turning her head to glance at the clearing around them. Clarke watched as the other girl looked up to stare at the sky. She did the same.

"What do the stars look like from up in the sky, Clarke?" Lexa asked thoughtfully, voice quiet. Clarke's eyes widened in surprise, head turning so she could ogle at the girl dreamily gazing up into the sky.

That certainly wasn't what she'd been expecting from the Commander. Such an innocent question - a childlike inquiry that seemed somewhat unbefitting of such a leader.

Perhaps it was befitting of Lexa, though.

"We...couldn't really see them from the Ark, actually." Clarke responded in a whisper. "They can only be seen from millions - or billions - of miles away. We were too close, I think."

Lexa nodded, head still upturned towards the sky.

They fell into a comfortable silence, the sounds of nature enveloping them in a humming ambience. Much more comforting than the hum of the Ark, Clarke thought.

She ached to learn more about the girl sitting next to her. While she was curious about the Commander and the traditions of her people, she found that she was much more interested in Lexa, herself.
The girl behind the mask.

"How old were you when you became Commander?" she asked innocently, hoping to broach a safe topic with the girl.

Lexa met her gaze then, eyes scanning the face of the girl beside her. Clarke swallowed under her scrutinizing gaze.

"I was called to lead my people at the age of 12," she responded finally, steady gaze on Clarke. "The Commander's spirit was passed to me upon my victory in the Conclave."

Clarke's eyes narrowed in confusion despite the wave of shock that overwhelmed her upon learning how young Lexa had been when all of this had started for her. Clarke couldn’t even begin to comprehend that information right now...

"'Conclave?'" she asked, continuing to meet the steady gaze upon her.

Lexa visibly swallowed at the question, turning away from Clarke to stare straight ahead. She seemed to be lost in thought, choosing her words very carefully.

"It is...how the Commander's spirit chooses between us - those of us who have been trained and prepared to accept the responsibility of leadership from a young age, that is. We must fight." Lexa's voice was emotionless as she responded, though Clarke thought it wavered a little towards the end.

She was still utterly confused.

"'The spirit...chooses?'" Clarke asked, disbelieving. "Like, reincarnation? And who's included in the 'we'?"

Lexa's lips pursed at Clarke's questions, clearly displeased with the direction of the conversation. Clarke was, too. It seemed to stray from the personal details she so longed to collect. She supposed she'd have to just go with it, though.
After a moment, the Commander finally answered Clarke.

"Yes. Those of us who are gifted such a fate, the Natblida, are prepared for many years to accept the responsibility of Heda's duties. The one chosen by the spirit will be guided to victory in their Conclave," Lexa spoke matter-of-factly, calm as ever.

"Nat-blida?" Clarke inquired, furrowing her brows. Lexa nodded.

"It means 'Nightblood.' Those of us who are born with black blood," she informed, tone still incredibly factual. "That is how it is known that the spirit has chosen us to compete."

Clarke tilted her head, trying her best to comprehend the other girl's words. She supposed it made sense that there'd have been some kind of mutation to the blood of those exposed to such high levels of radiation in one form or another. How this particular mutation manifested itself was something that Clarke was intrigued to find out. She'd love to run some tests on a sample of this so-called "nightblood" in the labs back on the Ark - but she knew that was impossible now.

She'd simply have to take Lexa's word for it.

Then it hit her.

"Wait a minute," she said, abruptly sitting up to turn towards Lexa who continued to regard her impassively. "Are you telling me that you...fight...each other to the death?" Her voice rose a couple octaves as her heart rate sped up. She was in utter shock.

Lexa nodded once, eyes boring into Clarke's with a quiet intensity she hadn't noticed before. Clarke swallowed harshly against her throat that now felt as if it were coated in sandpaper.

What in the actual fuck had she stumbled into?

"But...why would you all kill each other, then?" Clarke asked, sputtering a bit. "If it's so important that the whatever-you-call-em's are chosen to compete for the position, why kill the only people you deem worthy of leading everyone? How could you possibly trust a successor?!" Clarke sounded incredulous at this point.
Lexa closed her eyes for a moment, her mouth forming a hard line at the onslaught of questions. When she looked back at Clarke, her emotions were hidden beneath her features once again.

"A new generation of Natblida is found the moment a Commander Ascends. Their training begins immediately," she stated calmly, eyes locked onto Clarke's once again.

"My spirit will choose wisely, Clarke. It is our way."

Clarke was utterly taken aback. She finally unlocked their gaze, turning away to look at the sky again to gather her thoughts.

Not only did these people seem to have an unfailing belief in reincarnation, but they also allowed it to guide them into a barbaric ritual that seemed neither efficient nor necessary. In addition, they refused to acknowledge the faults of said ritual and passed it off as their "way."

It reminded her of the practices of the ancient Romans, a people who were so set in their ways that they would rather go to war to defend their faulty practices than admit that they might be wrong and try to change them. She supposed she shouldn't be surprised that humans had resorted back to this kind of lifestyle: extreme circumstances often called for extreme measures in response. It was hardly justifiable, morally-speaking, but it made logical sense.

Although it might play out a bit differently, circumstances were just as strenuous on the Ark. Clarke had witnessed firsthand just how desperately the Arkers clung to their laws in the hopes of maintaining order.

It was the only way to survive.

"That sounds...intense," Clarke granted finally. She flopped back down onto her back, continuing to stare up at the sky.

She wanted to say more, maybe attempt to comfort the girl who had been forced to commit such atrocities in the name of a flawed system, but she didn't feel quite comfortable doing so, yet. Maybe someday she would be able to express her condolences to the girl, tell her that she understands the crushing weight of actions committed outside of one's own autonomy. For now, though, her heart would just have to ache in silence for the broken soul beside her.
She could feel Lexa's gaze boring into her profile.

"How are your leaders chosen?" she asked, genuine curiosity coloring her tone.

Clarke shrugged, "We vote."

She glanced at Lexa again. The girl's brows were furrowed and she looked thoroughly skeptical.

"And what happens when your people vote incorrectly? What happens when a leader who does not have the best interests of your people in mind is chosen out of fear or misinformation?" The Commander's voice was harsh as she spoke, her eyes hardening as they regarded the blonde.

Clarke chuckled humorlessly, immediately seeing the legitimacy to Lexa's questions. She definitely had a point there.

"I'd like to think that we know better than that, but I won't deny that it's happened in the past - and it'll probably happen again," Clarke conceded drily. "But, I guess we reap what we sow, then, right?"

Lexa regarded her with a curious expression, eyes softening a little.

"You have strange sayings, Clarke of the Sky People," she said after a beat. Clarke smirked at her.

"Well, I could say the same for you, Lexa," she responded without thinking.

She froze, eyes widening as she turned to peer at Lexa to gauge her reaction. She couldn't believe she'd used the girl's first name so casually.

"It is fine, Clarke," the Commander responded, seemingly unmoved. "You may address me by whatever you like when we are in private."

Clarke was momentarily speechless.
"O...kay," she stammered unconfidently. "I'll keep that in mind."

The brunette simply nodded, satisfied.

"Lexa?" Clarke spoke again. The girl quirked an eyebrow at her.

"Yes, Clarke?"

"Just checking," Clarke responded, smiling innocently at the other girl.

Lexa's eyes seemed to dance in amusement at that, but her face remained stoic otherwise.

The two fell into a comfortable silence after that, both staring up at the sky spread vastly above them in every direction. Both contemplating the reasons why the universe decided to place them in this particular predicament. Both allowing a silent solidarity to ripple between them like gentle waves, reveling in the comfort it brought.

Clarke didn't know how much time had passed when Lexa finally spoke again.

"I think it is time for us to head back."

If Clarke's ears weren't mistaking her, she would've sworn that Lexa's tone sounded somewhat regretful. She brushed it off, though, nodding in agreement towards the Commander.

Lexa rose immediately, posture straight as ever as she walked over to extend her hand to Clarke. The blonde sat up gingerly, taking the other girl's hand and allowing herself to be pulled to her feet. The Commander was gentle as she bore the brunt of Clarke's weight to guide her to her feet.

Clarke winced as the pain in her leg increased exponentially upon standing. She definitely couldn't walk all the way back.
Lexa regarded her with quiet concern, a questioning look on her face. When her arms extended slightly towards the blonde, Clarke nodded her consent and the girl immediately went to scoop Clarke into her arms.

"Lexa?" Clarke asked as they walked out of the clearing and back into the covering of trees.

"Yes, Clarke?"

"Thank you. For...this," Clarke responded a little awkwardly.

Lexa met the blonde's gaze with a softened expression, the smallest of smiles playing at her lips.

"You are welcome, Clarke," she replied softly, her tone warm. Clarke smiled to herself.

As the two continued to walk through the trees, Clarke remembered something.

"Do you think that, maybe, I could -" she choked a little bit as the words came out a desperate question. "Would you let me see Lincoln?"

Lexa's jaw clenched and her gaze immediately snapped back to the blonde's from where it had been focused on the forest in front of her. Her expression hardened immediately, her eyes intense.

"Why do you wish to see him?" she questioned abruptly, eyes boring into Clarke's.

The blonde flinched a little under her gaze.

"I just - he saved my life, Lexa. I need to make sure he's okay," she spoke quietly, trying to placate the other girl.

Lexa's jaw worked back and forth as she averted her eyes away from the blonde, her expression returning to stoicism.
They were silent for a moment as they walked.

"You care about him?" she asked finally, voice strangely devoid of emotion.

Clarke was thrown for a second.

"I...He's my friend. Of course I do. I would've died without him," she implored honestly. Lexa's jaw clenched, but she remained otherwise expressionless.

"I will consider it, then," she replied flatly after a moment. Clarke let out a tiny sigh of relief.

"Thank you, Lexa. That's all I ask." Clarke's voice was no more than a whisper.

Lexa nodded curtly, continuing to stare ahead of her. Clarke thought they shouldn't be more than a few minutes outside of the village now. The sounds of the forest encompassed their otherwise silent procession.

Without warning, Lexa jerked forward slightly, stumbling with a hiss. Clarke frantically scanned the girl's face.

She gasped when her eyes latched onto the arrowhead now protruding from the girl's right shoulder.

Before she could react in any way, Lexa growled, taking off at a sprint towards the village. Not two seconds later, her stride faltered as Clarke heard the sickening sound of another arrow sinking into the Commander's flesh.

She stumbled forward slightly, adjusting Clarke's weight in her arms as she attempted to break into a run again. Clarke heard the sound of yet another arrow soaring through the air and piercing its already-wounded target once again.

Lexa crumpled forward at the impact, crying out a little as she did so. She braced her arms around Clarke, tucking the blonde's head into her shoulder in the attempt to prevent the injured girl from being impacted by her body weight as they were thrown into the dirt.
Regardless of the effort, the Commander's weight still came down hard on Clarke as they hit the ground. Clarke yelped at the force, breath knocked slightly out of her as she blinked against the stars dotting her vision.

Lexa shifted as quickly as she could in her injured state so that her body no longer crushed Clarke's, arms snaking out from under the blonde as she spun around on her knees to face their assailant.

It was then that Clarke noticed the arrow shafts sticking out of the Commander's calves along with the one already buried in her shoulder, black liquid pumping out around the injuries.

Clarke paled at the sight, blood coursing through her veins in panic - and a little bit of morbid fascination.

She now had a plainly obvious example of what the nightblood looked like in all of its mutated glory. She only wished it'd come at a slightly lower price.

"Lexa!! Are you -?!!"

"Stay behind me, Clarke. Don't move," Lexa commanded, voice flat and deadly.

She unsheathed her sword and began to rise from her knees towards their attacker.

Before Clarke could process what was happening, the sword abruptly clattered to the ground as another arrow embedded itself into Lexa's right forearm - the arm that had been holding the sword out in front of her.

She didn't make a sound as she fell to the ground again.

"Lexa!!" Clarke cried, scrambling over to her crumpled figure. She bit back the intense pain her movements caused her.

She crawled up beside Lexa, placing a trembling hand on the small of her back.
"Clarke, no. Get back," the Commander ordered, attempting to rise from her stomach as she did so. Her arms buckled from beneath her, though, and she fell facedown in the dirt with her head turned towards Clarke.

Lexa was looking up at the blonde and scanning her face wildly.

Clarke heard a twig snap and her head whipped up.

Even hidden in shadow, Clarke could make out the imposing figure of the man who approached them. She couldn't discern much about his appearance, his face and clothing hidden beneath a hooded cloak that draped his large frame, but she watched as he replaced his bow behind his back and drew out a sword instead.

He creeped towards them slowly, every bit the predator as he approached.

Lexa followed Clarke's gaze and growled fiercely, throwing her injured arm out in front of Clarke's kneeling frame as if to shield her from his advance.

"Clarke, when I say the word, you run," Lexa instructed her, a steeled firmness coloring her tone. "Do you hear me? Think past the pain and just run."

Clarke was frantic as she replied, "No, Lexa!! I can't just leave you here -"

"NO!" The Commander shouted, cutting her off. Her voice rose noticeably now. "Clarke, listen to me. You have to run. Please."

Clarke had never heard the Commander sound so desperate before. The girl's expression reflected her voice as she stared imploringly up at Clarke.

It was as if time started to slow around them.

Lexa's head was lifted off the ground as her eyes bored into Clarke's, eyelids fluttering as she fought
to maintain consciousness. Her desperate pleading continued as the attacker advanced on them.

He was only a few yards away now.

It suddenly dawned on Clarke that he probably wanted to take the Commander alive for some reason. That would explain his careful shot placement.

Clarke couldn't let that happen.

Moving faster than she had in her entire life, Clarke grabbed the dagger from Lexa's belt, sprang to her feet, and hurled the knife through the air in a desperate attempt to halt the man's advance.

She watched in elated disbelief as it buried itself deeply in his chest, causing him to stop abruptly in his tracks and stumble back a couple of steps with a surprised grunt. His sword slipped from his grasp as he did so.

Realizing that now was her chance, she bent down to grab Lexa's sword off the ground and ran towards him full-throttle, the adrenaline coursing through her veins causing her to momentarily forget her injuries.

"CLARKE, NO!!" Lexa cried from behind her, crippling dread coloring her tone as she watched the blonde sprint away from her.

Clarke didn't so much as glance behind her as she suddenly came upon their attacker. With a guttural war cry she hadn't known she was capable of producing until that moment, she slammed into his huge frame, tackling him to the ground with full force. She only just managed not to impale herself with the sword still held in her grasp as they roughly tumbled to the ground together.

His hood had fallen back as they fell and she now stared down into the face of a young warrior with white war paint smeared across his features. He seemed too stunned by her advance to move at the moment.

Without a second thought, she rose to straddle his chest just below where the hilt of the dagger stuck out and plunged the sword straight down into his throat with one hand.
She grimaced as blood splashed up onto her face.

His eyes widened in shock and agony as blood began to pour from his neck and out of his mouth. He choked on the substance, coughing and sputtering more of it onto Clarke as he fought the inevitable pull of death. His body twitched desperately beneath where she straddled him.

After a couple moments, the movements abruptly stilled and his head lulled to the side, glassy stare now permanently fixed on the sky above them.

Clarke was frozen in shock for a moment as she gazed down at him. Her heart thundered loudly in her ears, blocking out all other sound as her body violently trembled. Swallowing the bile that began to rise in her throat, she rolled off of him and onto her back beside his corpse.

Her breath heaved as she stared up at the canopy above her, a ringing now having replaced the pounding in her ears.

She had just killed a man.

As the ringing in her ears began to die down, she vaguely became aware of a panicked voice calling to her repeatedly.

"Clarke!! Clarke, look at me. Clarke!!"

With the last traces of adrenaline coursing through her system, she used her left hand to push her up and onto her feet. She staggered unsteadily as her eyes struggled to focus.

When they did, she saw Lexa slowly rising to her feet a couple of yards in front of her. Her expression was a mask of pain and utter terror as her eyes frantically scanned Clarke's body up and down, finally landing on her face.

"Clarke..." Lexa weakly called to her as she stumbled towards the blonde. "Are you hurt? Are you - ?"

Before Clarke could respond in any way or move forward to catch her, the Commander collapsed in
a bleeding heap just feet from her, unconscious.

Chapter End Notes

I'll do my best to catch up and answer comments from yesterday's and today's chapter - though no promises cuz I'm getting a bit busier as of this week...

That being said, I REALLYYYYY appreciate your comments and all of the kindness you've extended to me so far!! It makes me sooo happy that you seem to be enjoying the story.

Hopefully you continue to enjoy...(;
To Be Seen

Chapter Notes

The aftermath...

I must say - I put a lot of thought into the dialogue/interactions in this chapter. I even mixed in a couple famous Clexa lines, so props if you catch them (;

I did my best to take it to a little bit of a feely place, so hopefully I somewhat succeeded lolol. I also tried to include some symbolism here and there, so hopefully it works out.

Hope you enjoy!! (: 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything hurt.

Clarke didn't think she'd ever been in so much pain before.

It was as if her entire body was warring with itself, trying to determine whether it should expend the energy to heal or simply shut down completely.

At this point, she found she couldn't be bothered to care.

She was staring up at the ceiling of her tent, eyes glassy and pained from not having blinked recently enough. Her body was splayed out on the bed, weighing more heavily on the furs than it ever had before. Her left palm was upturned beside her as if in some sort of religious gesture.
Perhaps her body's way of subconsciously pleading on her soul's behalf.

It hadn't been long after Lexa collapsed that a horde of warriors came running.

They'd apparently heard the skirmish from afar and had come as quickly as they could. Unsurprisingly, Anya led the pack, followed closely behind by Indra and Gustus.

The warriors fanned out around the generals and began meticulously searching the woods around them, looking for any sign of additional threats to their Commander.

Indra and Gustus had immediately knelt beside Lexa while Anya advanced on Clarke, pressing the tip of her sword against the blonde's neck as she shot a fiery round of questions at the unseeing Sky Girl, eyes ablaze with contempt. Upon noticing the body of the dead warrior at Clarke's feet, though, she had guiltily lowered her weapon and bent to assess his frame - looking up at the blonde in stunned admiration after she'd done so.

Not long after, Clarke had been scooped into the arms of some random warrior as Lexa was hurriedly carried off to Nyko's tent by her three closest generals. She'd suffered extensive blood loss with the numerous wounds to her frame, but Clarke was confident they'd be able to stop the bleeding in time to save her life.

She had to believe Lexa would be okay for now. She didn't know what would happen if she weren't.

The warrior had taken Clarke straight back to her tent and laid her gently on her back atop her bed furs, staring questioningly down at her before turning swiftly on his heels and exiting the tent.

Mere minutes after he left, the old woman Clarke had seen that first night in Lexa's tent appeared, leaning over her and softly cupping her cheeks. Her eyes were alight with profound understanding and sympathy as she regarded the pale blonde before her.
She signaled for the guard waiting at the entrance of the tent to bring in a large metal tub, and he set it in the middle of the floor. It filled the space otherwise devoid of furniture - the entire tent typically only containing a bed and nightstand the rest of the time.

The guard then lifted Clarke into his arms and carried her to the edge of the tub as the woman removed the blonde's shoes and socks. He placed Clarke into the tub on her feet, and the woman immediately moved to place steadying hands at Clarke's waist.

After dismissing the guard, the woman quickly removed Clarke's clothing and lowered her into the tub, filling it with warm water that had been waiting in buckets just inside the entrance of the tent.

Clarke stared blankly ahead of her as the woman dutifully washed the blood and grime from her skin, taking the utmost care with her. From her periphery, Clarke noticed the woman watching her expectantly - almost as if she was waiting for Clarke to fall to pieces before her eyes.

Clarke wasn't going to, though. At least, she hoped not.

The most prevalent feeling inside of her was numbness. Maybe a little bit of nausea, as well. All she wanted to do was sleep. Sink into an all-consuming blackness that could keep her thoughts from running rampant. Keep her from wondering if the man she killed had left behind a family, if his loved ones would mourn him like she'd mourned her father. Keep her from seeing his eyes flash with one last burst of agony as he took his last breath.

Keep her soul from clawing angrily at her insides for having forced it to bear such a heavy burden.

Though she felt these things below the surface, she was grateful to the numbness for keeping it from consuming her.

In the recesses of her mind, she knew she'd done what she had to do in the moment. Although she'd had absolutely zero clue about what she was doing when she'd rushed the warrior, she knew she couldn't have lived with herself if she'd let him take Lexa. It would've been nearly unbearable if she'd been forced to helplessly watch on as the warrior took off with the Commander on his back.

She would've never forgiven herself for that.

She'd be able to live with this outcome in time, though. She would have to.
Living with it didn’t mean she would loathe herself any less for it, though. She’d simply store it away as another tool in her arsenal to use against herself in a moment of weakness.

If there was one thing Clarke had perfected throughout the course of her life, it was self-hatred.

Clarke barely registered the woman standing her up in the tub to dress her in loose-fitting black pants and a white shirt that hung from her shoulders comfortably. She also noted that her skin-colored chest bindings had been replaced by clean ones, her underwear changed, as well.

The woman then changed the dressing on Clarke's arm and gave her syrup for the pain coursing through her body.

She signaled the guard in again and he immediately came to lift Clarke from the bath and carry her to the furs. He set her down gently and left without a word.

Clarke closed her eyes as she felt the woman come to stand over her and begin to stroke her cheek gently, cooing to her in Trigedasleng.

Tears began to run down her face and pool by Clarke's ears at the gentle lilt of the words, and the woman wiped them away as the blonde imagined her mother would have.

Stilling her movements, she bent down to press a healing kiss to Clarke's forehead.

"Reshop, skai prisa."

With that, she quietly made her way from the tent, leaving Clarke to cry herself to sleep in silence.
A blinding light forced her from her restless slumber far too soon.

She blinked her painfully swollen eyes open and forced them to adjust to the unwelcome light.

Standing at her bedside regarding her with a curious expression was Gustus. The warrior scanned her face, taking note of her red and puffy eyes that most likely sported bruising circles beneath them in a surprisingly sympathetic manner.

He looked nearly-apologetic to have woken her.

"Heda wishes to see you, Klark Kom Skaikru," he told her softly, voice as steady as his gaze. Clarke stared back at him.

Part of her wanted to tell him to go away - to leave her to wallow in her misery in private. To allow her to be crushed by the heavy weight of her darkening soul.

But another part of her was growing more and more anxious at the thought of seeing Lexa, needing to know how she fared. She needed to see her face, needed to see for herself that she was okay.

That part ultimately won out.

Clarke nodded to him and he immediately lifted her into his strong arms.

They made their way to Nyko's tent in tense silence. The villagers watched her in passing with widened eyes and something close to admiration shining in their features.

Clarke wished she couldn't see them.
Once they arrived at their destination, Gustus hesitated for a beat outside of its entrance - just long enough for Clarke to hear Lexa's scathing voice waft from within the tent.

"Where is she?"

Seeming to shake himself out of whatever had given him pause, Gustus immediately made his way into the tent at the words.

Everything seemed to go quiet upon their entrance.

The tent was empty save for three people crowded around a single bed on the right side, all seemingly engaged with its occupant.

Nyko stood to the left of Lexa's bed, looking down at her with unhidden concern and furrowed brows. Indra was on the side opposite him, seemingly wearing the same expression as she gazed at her Commander. Anya stood at the foot of the bed, slightly turned away from the newest additions to the tent with both hands on her hips. Her posture emanated frustration.

The blonde couldn't be bothered to care as her gaze locked onto the most important part of the scene before her.

Lexa.

The girl sat up in bed, pillows propped behind her back for comfort. Her legs were bent at the knees and held slightly up off the bed by a firm rectangular cushion that allowed for her injured calves to be free from the mattress pressing into them - both were also wrapped in thick gauze. Her right arm was wrapped in the material, as well, her shoulder sporting a bandage as it was cradled in a sling.

She wore simple black shorts and a grey tunic that hung loosely off her injured frame.

Her face was noticeably more pale, her eyes sunken in darkened circles that looked somewhat similar to bruises as they framed the orbs, her hair loosed of braids as it cascaded around her face in waves. Her cheekbones seemed to stand out in her face, creating more of a dramatic-looking structure for her beautiful features to stand upon.
She looked beyond-exhausted.

When green locked onto blue, time seemed to slow around them.

It was as if the edges of Clarke's periphery blurred everything else out so that her focus could fall entirely on the girl now regarding her with a poignant worry that caused a powerful ache to rattle within Clarke's chest.

Clarke didn't see the Commander in this moment.

The girl who looked upon her was simply Lexa.

A girl who seemed to have been rendered utterly and completely vulnerable by the depth of her concern in her weakened state.

Beyond the emerald green of Lexa's eyes, Clarke saw for the first time what was normally supposed to be hidden behind the mask usually in place there:

A soul.

One soul reaching out to pull the other currently drowning in the endless depths of the ocean from beneath crushing waves threatening to overtake them both. One soul pulling so hard that the other was simply powerless to resist - would never have tried to, in the first place. The thought of trying to resist something so pure was too agonizing to contemplate. Never in her life had Clarke believed that someone wanted to reach her so badly, to save her from her own chaos that she gave free reign to wreak havoc within her mind.

Clarke couldn't remember the last time she'd wanted to latch onto anything so desperately.

As their souls continued to acknowledge one another upon finally being given the opportunity to do so, the rest of the figures in the room idled silently around them, waiting.

Even to the casual observer, the moment was simply too powerful to interrupt.
After another moment, though, Anya cleared her throat.

"*Heda,* we must act promptly against the *Azgeda.* Their queen continues to defy you -" Her imploring was broken off as Lexa raised a hand to silence her, eyes never leaving Clarke's.

"We will discuss this at a later time. For now, leave us. All of you," she commanded, tone final.

All the eyes in the room seemed to snap to their Commander's face in disbelief.

"*Heda,* I beg you -"

"*Lexa,* please -"

Different voices spoke at once in protest, but Lexa silenced them, once again, with a subtle flick of her wrist. The effect was immediate.

"I have said all that I will say on the matter for now. Do not question me," she hissed threateningly, voice low.

"*Leave. Us.*"

After another moment of tense silence, the three surrounding the Commander's bed slowly made their way out of the tent, eyes locked straight ahead of them as they exited. None of them looked at Clarke as they passed.

Not that she would have noticed if they did, anyways. Her gaze remained solidly locked onto Lexa's.

Neither dared to so much as blink.

Gustus walked further into the tent, coming to stand where Anya had just been at the foot of the bed.
He looked expectantly at his Commander.

"Find a chair for her," Lexa instructed him quietly.

He nodded, turning away from the girl and effectively breaking the gaze that had been held until that moment.

Clarke shook her head a little as her soul hid itself away again. The extended exposure left her feeling a plethora of emotions more intense than perhaps anything else ever had. A visceral rawness fought for precedence over the rest.

She could feel Lexa's gaze searing through Gustus's back to reach her as he shuffled about, grabbing hold of a wooden chair near the tables holding the various medical supplies on the opposite side of the tent. He turned on his heels and approached the bed once more, placing the chair down on the right side nearest the entrance of the tent.

Clarke intentionally kept her eyes from locking back onto Lexa's, suddenly fearing the despondency the other girl's gaze stirred within her.

It was irrational, but it kept her safe for the moment.

Gustus settled her gently into the chair, and she winced a little as the wood pressed uncomfortably against her.

He nodded to Lexa once more and strode out of the tent.

Clarke's eyes were glued to the ground as the two sat in a thick silence. She heard rustling in the bed before her as Lexa pulled one of the pillows out from behind her. She held it out to Clarke who watched the whole thing from the top of her vision.

"Put this beneath you. It will help."

Not ready to look at the other girl quite yet, Clarke took it, nodding gratefully as she situated it beneath her, gaze still down-turned.
They sat in silence for a beat.

"Look at me, Clarke," Lexa entreated her softly, voice ever-so-gentle.

Clarke took a shaky breath, still keeping her eyes trained on the floor.

"Please."

The word was so soft, laced with so much tenderness, that Clarke's already-tired eyes began to water with unbidden emotion.

She finally looked up as tears rolled steadily down her face.

Their souls hailed each other once again, seeming to sigh in relief at having found what they'd so regretfully lost moments before. They conversed quietly in the silence, spilling their deepest secrets to one another in haste.

What an unexpected treasure it was to have found an equal to confess to in this moment.

"Are you alright?" Lexa's voice was rough with barely-contained emotion.

Clarke attempted to smile at the girl, miserably failing as her lips quivered into a grimace.

"I-I've been better," Clarke replied finally, moving to wipe the tear tracks from her cheeks. Lexa watched her with uninhibited concern.

"I should be the one asking you that question, anyways," the blonde continued, keeping her voice at a whisper.

"How are your injuries? Are you in pain? Do you need -?"
"Lexa, stop," Clarke whispered, interrupting the other girl's emphatic questioning. "I'll be fine. *You're* the one who almost died." The words tasted bitter as she spoke them.

"*You're* the one who nearly sacrificed herself for me," Lexa countered, just as bitterly. "Why would you do that, Clarke? Why would you *deliberately* disobey me in such a way? Do you really value your own safety so little?!" Her voice rose in acute disbelief and incredulousness.

"You have had no *training* to attempt such a rescue, and your recklessness left you completely vulnerable to further attacks!! How could you have believed that to be the best course of action?!"

Clarke frowned as the girl continued.

"You should've left me behind. *Two* nearly died there instead of one."

A flash of anger coursed through the blonde, leaving her floundering momentarily for a response.

She attempted to take after Lexa as she schooled her features into a stoic mask of her own.

"I'm still new to your culture, but when someone *saves* your life, my people say 'thank you,'" Clarke responded bitterly, acid dripping from her tone.

She looked away from Lexa to take a steadying breath, fighting against the warring emotions within her.

"I'm serious, Clarke," Lexa said, voice rising with vehemence. "In order to survive, we must make hard choices. Sometimes, we must look beyond momentary compassion and allow our primal instincts to take over - the ones that drive us on to *survive!* Otherwise, we run the risk of succumbing to fleeting emotions and impulses."

The Commander's eyes pierced Clarke's profile as the blonde refused to look at her, bristling at her words.

"And what if my *instinct* was to save you?! What then?!" Clarke challenged hotly, snapping her viscous glare back to Lexa's face.
Lexa seemed thrown by her response, eyes widening slightly as her brows shot up. A fierce battle waged within her gaze as she worked to school her expression.

She barely managed to secure her mask back into place as she spoke.

"It goes against human nature to endanger one's life like that, Clarke," she replied, voice laced with fervor. "Even one who claims they have nothing to live for can't be immune to such impulses." She sounded as if she was trying to convince herself of that just as much as Clarke.

The blonde huffed in frustration, steeling her jaw as she looked away from the Commander once more.

"What does it matter to you?!" Clarke spat challengingly. "Your warriors go off to die for you all the time. How am I any different?!"

"You're not one of my warriors, Clarke. You're -"

"Your prisoner, I know," Clarke finished for her, chuckling humorlessly. "Don't remind me."

Lexa looked positively wounded at that.

"Clarke, that's not what I -"

"Save it, Lexa," Clarke said, rising up from her chair suddenly. She wavered a bit upon standing, the blood suddenly rushing to her head.

Lexa reached out to steady her immediately, but stopped herself just inches from making contact with Clarke's skin. She looked up at the blonde readying herself to leave with something close to desperation.

"Clarke, please. You shouldn't be standing..." her voice trailed off as the blonde met her gaze again.
Clarke felt a pang of sympathy for the injured girl before her.

In the back of her mind, she knew they were both probably overly-emotional and reactive due to the pain medicine they'd taken. She needed to take a step back and try to examine the situation from a more objective angle. The Commander was simply doing her job in reprimanding Clarke's reckless actions. She would probably do the same to any of her people who went against her wishes to risk themselves in Lexa's name.

Probably.

Regardless, Clarke couldn't allow herself to continue to feel so helpless around the other girl - despite how much her soul might protest against the efforts.

Lexa was the Commander for god's sake. The person who quite literally held the fate of all of her people's lives in the palm of her hand.

For their sake, it was imperative that she keep herself from getting swept up in the dangerous tide of sentiment threatening to associate itself with the girl in front of her. It would only deter her from her mission - give her reason to hesitate when it came time to putting the Arkers first.

She barely knew the Commander, after all. And, regardless of how well she'd been treated thus far, she was still a prisoner.

She needed to keep that in mind at all times.

Clarke sighed after a moment, moving to pinch the bridge of her nose between her thumb and pointer finger as she closed her eyes.

More than anything else, she just needed her power back. She needed to stop feeling so helpless in the presence of the girl she felt so inexplicably drawn to, of the girl who she'd felt compelled to save.

She also realized that she needed to stop being so harsh on the girl in front of her. Neither was truly to blame for the situation they currently found themselves in - despite what they might think.
"I'm sorry, Lexa," Clarke whispered, eyes still closed. "I didn't mean to get so heated. I just...I guess I'm just...worried. Worried and exhausted."

She felt more than saw Lexa nod in acceptance of the apology. She was silent for a moment.

"He was your first kill."

It wasn't a question. Simply a statement of fact - albeit a rather sympathetic utterance.

Clarke nodded after a beat, sinking back into the chair in a gesture defeat with her eyes still closed.

"I wish I could tell you that it will be your last. That it was simply a passing nightmare to be locked away in the recesses of your mind to never again be revisited," Lexa spoke regretfully, voice tinged in bitterness.

"But I will not make false promises."

Clarke's lips formed into a hard line, every fiber of her being fighting the tears that threatened to spill over at the other girl's words.

"It does not get much easier, either, I'm afraid," Lexa continued, tone beyond-gentle now. "It is simply a by-product of the lifestyle we have chosen to live. As you said before...we reap what we sow."

Clarke didn't know what to say to that. She felt herself being unwillingly overwhelmed by the tide within her, and she was powerless to stop it.

They fell into another silence, the air now tinged with a bitter sadness that scratched at Clarke's core relentlessly.

"Do you ever stop seeing the look in their eyes?" Clarke asked finally, voice rough with raw emotion.
She met Lexa's gaze again, allowing the tide to pass freely between them, to sweep them both into its path.

Lexa frowned in resigned sorrow.

"I...I've found that it actually begins to reflect from your own eyes for others to see, unfortunately," she admitted regretfully.

She spoke with an ancient sadness far too profound to be carried by someone at such a young age.

Clarke stilled for a moment, allowing the depth of the girl's words to wash over her for all their worth. They were as tragic as they were truthful.

The Commander was nothing if not honest in her wisdom.

"Great," Clarke quipped, deciding to try for levity all of a sudden. "So I get to look forward to walking around with the eyes of some dead guy scaring the living hell out of anyone who looks my way for the rest of my life. Just great."

To her utter surprise, Lexa's lips quirked up into a genuine smile as she chuckled deep within her throat.

Though soft and concealing her teeth, the sight still caused Clarke's heart to flutter unreasonably in her chest, marveling at the pure beauty of it.

"Be thankful that you do not walk with the eyes of hundreds of corpses, then, Clarke," Lexa responded, voice light with morbid amusement.

Clarke answered her with a smirk, "Not yet, anyway."

What a strange moment to find such comedy.

"I will do my best to ensure that you never have to," Lexa promised, suddenly serious again. Her
eyes flashed a fierce intensity as she spoke.

And the Commander never made false promises.

"Well..." Clarke said, fidgeting a little under the intense stare directed at her. "I suppose that's all a girl can ask for, right?"

Lexa's gaze softened a little.

"I suppose so."

The blonde nodded, pursing her lips as she started to feel a bit of awkwardness creeping into her posture. She suddenly felt the need to get up and walk around.

Curse her stupid leg for forcing her to stick around for such conversations. Not that she regretted it; she just simply wasn't used to such draining exchanges. If she'd had anything even remotely close to this on the Ark, she would've been long gone by now.

She was noticeably more exhausted now than she had been when she'd entered the tent - and that was saying a lot. She decided she could use it as her out.

"I'm...pretty exhausted, to say the least," Clarke said softly after a moment. "I'm sure you are, too. We should...get some rest, I think." She rose up slowly from the chair.

Lexa barely concealed her disappointment as her eyes followed Clarke's movement.

"Of course," she said, shaking her head a little. "I just...wanted to make sure that you were alright."

Clarke smiled sweetly down at the girl whose voice now sounded so small.

"Well, I appreciate it," Clarke replied genuinely, still smiling. "I'm glad you're okay, too, Lexa."
The Commander nodded curtly in response, expression stoic once again.

She called for Gustus who had apparently been nearby the entire time. He walked in almost immediately, eyeing the two girls curiously as he came to stand beside Clarke. He bent down and quite literally swept her off her feet after a moment.

Clarke inclined her head in respect to the other girl still watching her as Gustus turned to exit the tent.

"Clarke?" Lexa called, right as the two were about to leave.

Gustus stopped in his tracks, turning so Clarke could meet Lexa's gaze once more.

"Yes, Lexa?"

"Thank you," the Commander said quietly, a small smile playing at her lips.

Clarke's answering smile was much wider.

"Any time, Commander."
Chapter End Notes

How’d I do in the feels department??

Hahaha hope you liked it (:}
A Reunion of Sorts

Chapter Notes

An early post!! A pretty lengthy one, as well...

Life update - I just got back to school yesterday because I'll be taking a summer course on campus for a month! It's satisfying a major requirement that I don't have time to take during the semester (thanks to my advisor who absolutely shafted me, schedule-wise) soooo that means that I probably won't be posting once a day any more...

I know, I know, the HORROR hahaha but have no fear - this story is DEFINITELY still continuing (really just getting started, in fact), and the updates will still be pretty frequent (more than once a week for sure, maybe even every other day - who knows?). Point being: I just wanted to let you know in case you start to worry about not seeing everyday updates anymore.

(My comment replies may also decrease in frequency, but I will still do my best!! I read them all and love them dearly, regardless.)

With that, I guess I'll leave you to read this latest installment!!

Enjoy (:)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Am I done, yet?"

"No, skai prisa."
"When will I be done?"

"As soon as you have found peace within your mind."

"Aw, come on, Nyko!!" Clarke groaned, throwing her head back in exasperation. "I've been up on this boulder for, like, two days now."

"It's been one hour," he replied matter-of-factly, smirking up at her as she rolled her eyes.

Clarke glared at him from where she sat cross-legged roughly twenty feet off the ground on the largest rock she'd ever seen in her entire life.

Nyko had carried her on his back as he'd scaled the boulder, refusing to answer her questions as he set her down and made his way back to the forest floor quickly - effectively leaving her stranded on the damn thing.

This was his way of helping her "heal her mind," telling her that it would help her make peace with her nightmares if she did so. Clarke was still waiting for the peaceful part to come, though.

They were in the middle of the woods a good mile outside of TonDC, surrounded by a plethora of trees in every direction. Mid-afternoon sunlight broke through the canopy in beams all around them, beating down on their bodies with intensity in the heat of the day. Her tunic clung to her like another layer of skin, her black pants constricting her legs as if some sort of snake was wrapped around them and squeezing.

The two of them had been accompanied by one of Lexa's most skilled warriors, a large man by the name of Ryder, who leaned up against a tree a few feet behind where the healer attempted to give his lesson. The Commander had sent him in her place to guard them, as she'd been unable to accompany them due to the amount of meetings she had to hold in the village that day.

Nyko stood a few feet in front of the rock, looking earnestly up at Clarke with his arms crossed. No matter what the blonde did to annoy him, he remained calm and patient at all times, refusing to give into her persistent protests.
"You will never calm your mind if you keep forcing it to form words for your mouth to speak," he told her, eyes light with amusement. He seemed to be getting more of a kick out of this than he probably should.

Clarke dramatically rolled her eyes at him.

"I think that's probably the nicest way anyone's ever told me to 'shut the fuck up' before, Nyko," she observed casually. "Props to you, sir."

Someone snorted.

Both Clarke and Nyko's eyes instantly snapped up to see Anya and Lexa making their way to the pair through the trees.

Ryder immediately stood at attention upon seeing his Commander approach, posture going rigid as she inclined her head to him in passing.

The two women came to stand in front of Nyko, who had his back turned to Clarke now as he greeted them.

Lexa's right arm was wrapped and braced in a sling and her calves were thickly padded with gauze over her typical uniform. She showed no sign of limping as she walked towards them, though.

Clarke was thoroughly impressed by her strength.

"I must hand it to the skai gada," Anya - who had apparently been the one to snort - spoke with wry amusement. "She speaks with a sharp tongue - something I find quite admirable in people, to say the least. Let us hope she does not end up having it cut out of her mouth." She raised an eyebrow as she spoke, obviously teasing - though a sick joke it was.

"Shof op, Anya," Lexa commanded, clearly annoyed with her warrior. "Do not say such things."

Anya shook her head a little, hands going up in front of her in a mock gesture of surrender.
"Forgive me, Heda," the woman replied all-too-sarcastically. Lexa shot her a side-long glare.

Rolling her eyes in frustration, the Commander stepped towards Nyko.

She glanced over his shoulder and locked eyes with Clarke for a brief moment, noticeably softening at the sight of the blonde. Clarke smiled bashfully back at the brunette, feeling her cheeks flush in embarrassment at her now-fluttering heart as she looked down towards her lap and fiddled with her arm brace. Lexa seemed to appreciate the girl's reaction to her, and she fought off the smallest of smiles as she looked back to Nyko.

Schooling her expression beneath her war paint, the Commander regarded him expectantly with her good hand propped on her hip.

"Might I ask why Clarke Kom Skaikru sits atop that boulder, healer?" she questioned inquisitively, eyebrow raised. Nyko shifted his weight under her gaze.

"We...are practicing meditation rituals, Heda," he told the girl hesitantly, hands fidgeting awkwardly at his sides. "I thought it would be easier for her to clear her mind if she was...higher up." The man looked incredibly uncomfortable now.

"See!!" Clarke spoke up, raising her eyebrows and pointing accusingly towards Nyko. "I'm not the only one who uses questionable logic around here!" She felt like she was tattle-tailing on a fellow classmate back on the Ark.

"Someone should've told him that the higher the elevation is, the thinner the air!" The foursome eyed her with barely-contained amusement now.

"Can't meditate when you're busy suffocating, can ya?" She fanned herself dramatically.

To Clarke's never-ending surprise, Anya laughed merrily at that.

Without a word, Lexa suddenly walked to the tree directly up against the right side of the rock and began to climb it one-handed. Clarke watched in awe as the girl quickly made her way up the tree without so much as a sound. The Commander's lithe body seemed to glide along the bark, fitting
invisible holds as if the trunk had been designed specifically for her to climb gracefully up its length.

Now pressed against the tree a couple of feet above the top of the rock, Lexa sprung down and landed with a graceful thud next to Clarke's seated form. She sunk down beside the blonde and dangled her injured legs off the edge of the rock, swinging them absently and throwing her good arm into her lap where she sat with relaxed posture.

Clarke swore she'd never seen the Commander look so young before.

"You are right, Clarke," Lexa leaned in after a moment and whispered conspiringly to the blonde. "The air is definitely thinner up here."

Clarke threw her head back and laughed loudly, the sound harmonizing perfectly with the chorus of nature singing around them. Her heart warmed as the laughter reverberated back into her chest, brushing sweetly against the worn edges of her soul.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so free.

She looked back at Lexa who was watching her with an incredibly softened expression, eyes dancing in delight and something close to longing as she watched the girl. Clarke blushed once again under the unhindered affection in the gaze.

"Looking to do some meditating, Leksa?" Anya called up to the girl, standing beside Nyko with her hands on her hips.

The two of them were joined by Ryder who stood a little behind them, watching their Commander with curiosity. Anya simply looked entertained as she regarded the brunette.

"I merely wished to gain a better vantage point to scan our surroundings," Lexa responded seriously, straightening her posture regally. "I am simply utilizing your teachings, Anya."

The warrior laughed heartily in response.

"You were always more trouble than you were worth, seken," she replied, shaking her head in mock
disapproval.

Lexa met Clarke's gaze on her profile and winked, lips forming a playfully crooked smile.

Clarke nearly fell off the rock.

"Why don't you deliver the news we came to give the Sky Girl, Heda?" Anya asked after a beat, sounding slightly exasperated at the Commander's escapades.

Lexa nodded, immediately securing her mask back into place. She rose fluidly from her sitting position and extended her left hand to Clarke. The blonde took it gratefully and allowed herself to be pulled to her feet. Lexa let go of her hand immediately afterwards.

Clarke shuffled a little, wincing slightly at the blood now rushing back into her extremities.

"Of course," the Commander called down to her warrior as the blonde gathered herself. She turned to face Clarke.

"Lincoln awaits your return to the village."

Her tone was carefully nonchalant as she eyed the other girl with a stoic expression. Clarke was momentarily speechless as her jaw fell open.

She broke into a radiant smile.

"Are you serious?!" she asked, unbelievably overjoyed. Lexa nodded curtly.

"I would never joke about such things," she replied matter-of-factly. "I considered your request from last week and decided to grant you a visit with him. The two of you will meet in the village square."

Clarke smiled impossibly wider at the information, feeling the strong urge to throw her arms around the other girl in an ecstatic and thankful embrace.
She restrained herself, though.

It had been a week since they'd been attacked by the man in the forest. TonDC was on high-alert in the wake of the events, and the thickness of the air in the usually peaceful and bustling village seemed to press down a little harder on Clarke's chest than usual.

She'd learned that the assailant was a member of the Ice Nation, the most resistant to Lexa's coalition of any of the 12 clans.

Their queen apparently enforced a much more brutal regime on her people than the Commander was comfortable with, and the two had relentlessly clashed on nearly everything since Lexa had risen to power. From what Clarke understood, the queen seemed somewhat desperate to overthrow Lexa and take control of the lands for herself. If she succeeded in doing so, though, it would most likely result in an all-out war in revolt between the clans - a war that would end in extensive losses on all sides.

Their queen, a ruthless woman named Nia, seemingly enjoyed riling the clans up on a consistent basis, regardless. The half-assed attempt to capture Lexa - labeled as such due to the fact that she'd only sent one warrior to do a job that would probably require a small army, at the very least - was merely one of the many dangerous ways she attempted to prove the Commander's incompetence, hoping that it would miraculously result in her succession to the throne in Lexa's place. It only served to anger the clans of the coalition further, though, and Nia treated their threats of war as something of a joke.

As it was becoming abundantly clear to anyone who paid even the smallest ounce of attention, it was all a game to the Ice Queen - a very selfish, blood-thirsty, and vicious game, at that, but a game no less.

The Commander had been endlessly busy in the aftermath of the attack as word had been sent to the leaders of the others clans in the coalition. The presence of their ambassadors had been required in TonDC, and Lexa had been absorbed in a flurry of meetings for the entire week in the wake of their arrival.

Although it didn't surprise Clarke in the least that there were such tensions on the ground - they were human beings, after all, prone to the same self-destructive tendencies that led them to ruin in the first place - , she couldn't figure out what it was that seemed to heighten the issue.
Every time she learned a new piece of information from Lexa or Nyko, there was always something they weren't saying. Something that immediately caused Lexa's eyes to harden into impenetrable orbs that set her entire face alight with unimaginable rage each time she spoke of the dissenting clan or its leader.

Something that Clarke was beyond desperate to uncover.

In addition to this, it seemed as if the ambassadors purposefully dispersed from the village at the end of each day, never wanting to remain in gathered clusters for too long for whatever reason. She watched their strange behavior from a distance as they'd slink into the woods, eyeing the surroundings with a wariness that Clarke thought to be a little too cautious for them to simply be checking for rogue Ice Nation assassins. In fact, she really couldn't seem to figure out why they were so fearful of the landscape all of a sudden.

They knew they could feasibly handle anything the Ice Nation threw their way - this was something else entirely, she thought.

She needed to figure out what it was.

Besides that, though, Clarke gathered that the general consensus seemed to be that the Ice Nation and their queen needed to be dealt with sooner rather than later.

Though the prospect of such a war was most likely terrifying for those faithful to the coalition (who couldn't be completely sure that their fellow allies wouldn't turn on them at the last minute in a frenzied change of alignment to back the more outwardly-aggressive Nia), the thought of the Ice Queen taking the Commander's place by force was a much worse prospect to the majority of the Grounders than such a fight.

Even if their traditions and laws wouldn't stand for her to simply steal that kind of power for herself in the wake of the Commander's murder, the possibility of a coup de force outside of the jurisdiction of their laws became more and more realistic as the days wore on. The threat was simply too great for them to continue to remain idle.

Clarke knew they had to be smart about it, though. They needed to wait for the right moment, obtain more information and evidence against Nia so that they didn't needlessly start something that could've been dealt with diplomatically.

That kind of diplomatic solution seemed less and less of a possibility as the days wore on, though.
Despite her gnawing curiosity and the desire to sneak into every meeting, the blonde was forced to go through the motions of her exercises day-by-day, settling back into her routine with Nyko and having to make due with the less-frequent interactions she'd have with Lexa.

From a distance, she would watch as the Commander would hear every ambassador out, give every individual her full attention despite most likely having heard the same testimony over and over again. Lexa was nothing if not patient, though, and her desire to find the best diplomatic path was evident in every interaction Clarke saw her having with the ambassadors.

She saw the Commander latch onto every detail presented to her, consider every possible scenario that could've led to the outcome that transpired. More than anything, though, she saw a leader who truly listened to her people, who took great joy in understanding the various perspectives that drove her subjects to action.

She also saw a leader who fully understood and accepted what she, personally, would have to pay should she fail in finding the best solution - death being the ultimate and unforgiving price.

Clarke was learning more from simply observing Lexa's interactions with her subjects than she had from reading any book or attending any lesson on the Ark. It satisfied her insatiable need for knowledge, and she silently thanked the Commander for allowing her to quell that thirst - even from a distance.

In addition to this, the face-to-face interactions they got to have were quickly becoming the highlight of Clarke's days.

Lexa seemed to purposefully put her mask away on the highest shelf when she was with Clarke, ostensibly needing the sigh of relief that was allowed while being in the presence someone who didn't constantly desire guidance from the Commander - and who simply seemed content to interact with Lexa, alone.

They would talk about nothing and everything all at the same time: of random and inconsequential childhood memories that brought smiles to their faces and warmth to their hearts, of how it was even possible for the sun to paint such glorious colors in the sky as it was making room for the moon, of the irony of a burning fire and how fascinating it was for something that created so much warmth and light to be capable of such devastating destruction.

Their conversations were short and probably exceptionally boring to anyone else who would happen to listen; but to the two girls, those exchanges were quickly becoming the most important reason to get out of bed in the morning - though neither of them could even begin to figure out why.
More importantly, though, the two would make sure to steal quieter moments away to allow their souls to converse in screaming silence, unable to resist the desire to find a moment of peace with their newfound confidante. It was almost selfish the way the depths of their eyes seemed to confess the things their lips couldn't say, to speak of desires they had been forced to hide from prying eyes that might seek to take advantage of such a vulnerable display.

There was a profound beauty in this silence, a silence that gave them such safe refuge to revel in when the sounds around them threatened to deafen them completely - a silence that both would happily lose themselves in if ever given the chance.

For now, though, Clarke would simply have to continue to be thankful to have found such a place to escape the constant hum of life that relentlessly sought to drive her mad.

--------------------------------------------------------

Nyko ended up being the one to carry her back to TonDC.

Though Lexa protested as he'd made to retrieve Clarke from the rock, she was ultimately overruled by her three subjects. They all agreed that it was too soon for her to bear such a weight with her injuries still healing, and Clarke wholeheartedly backed them up.

They walked towards the edge of the forest now with Lexa, Anya and Ryder trailing a little behind them. The three warriors were speaking Trigedasleng in hushed voices, and Clarke became increasingly annoyed that she still couldn't understand them.
To begin to remedy this annoyance, she'd created somewhat of a game with Nyko a couple of days ago.

She'd either bring him an object or point to something and have him give her its equivalent in Trigedaslang. Sometimes, she'd even throw out random words in English for him to translate out of the blue.

So that's precisely what she'd done during their walk back to the village.

Occasionally, Lexa would speak up from behind them and answer Clarke before Nyko could, immediately falling back into her other conversation after she'd spoken. The blonde smiled to herself at the Commander's obvious eavesdropping.

Once they'd made their way to the center of the village, Clarke had Nyko put her down so that she could walk the rest of the way. He followed closely behind her as she slowly made her way through the marketplace.

Villagers caught her eye as she passed and smiled kindly at her, inclining their head respectfully to the Commander who now stood beside Nyko following in the blonde's stride. Clarke returned their smiles graciously and continued through the busy center, making her way to the gathering place near the Commander's tent.

Ever since the attack, it had seemed like the entire village would welcome her like a hero every time she showed her face anywhere. They would approach her and bring her gifts of all sorts, fawning over her like a favored grandchild, and her tent was nearly filled up with the various treasures she'd received from the kind villagers.

For the first time in her life, she'd begun to feel like apart of something, and she found that she was nearly addicted to the feeling of belonging.

She stopped suddenly, ripped from her thoughts, when a figure emerged from inside the tent, instantly coming to a stop, as well, when he locked eyes with her.

Lincoln.
She felt tears well up in her eyes as she beamed at him, making her way towards him. The two came to a stop merely two feet apart and took stock of each other.

He wore a grey t-shirt that hung off his muscular shoulders and met loose blank pants that gathered around the ankles of his bare feet. Apart from a yellowing bruise beneath his right eye, he appeared otherwise unscathed.

He was smiling softly at her, his eyes dancing with mirth.

Without a word, she closed the remaining distance between them and wrapped her left arm tightly around his torso, grasping onto the fabric of the shirt clinging to his back as she did so. She tucked her injured arm into his hard stomach, pressing her right ear against his chest to listen to his heartbeat as she breathed in the calming scent of smoke and pine.

She sighed in relief as she hugged him.

He shifted his weight beneath him, overtaken by surprise for a brief moment before responding. He brought his arms up and returned her embrace with fervor, right hand coming up to cradle her head where it rested on his chest as the palm of his left hand gently pressed between her shoulder blades.

This was the first time Clarke had been hugged in months, and the realization washed over her and left tears streaming down her face in haste.

How she'd missed this feeling.

The two stood in their embrace for endless moments, it seemed, reveling in the warmth of the body pressed against them - oblivious to the gawking stares directed their way.

After a moment, someone cleared their throat.

"Well," came Nyko's voice somewhat awkwardly from behind them, "I believe my services are no longer needed for the day."

Clarke unwrapped herself from Lincoln but kept her hand on his forearm as she turned to watch the
healer retreat. She met Nyko's kind eyes as he inclined his head and turned on his heels to make towards his tent.

A furious blush colored her cheeks as she noticed the amount of curious stares on her - including those of Anya and Ryder.

The blush was counteracted by a strange coldness as her blood stilled at the sight of the Commander's eyes on her.

Never before had she seen such a look on the other girl's features.

Lexa's face was contorted in some kind of fierce perturbation as she looked at them, eyes alight like molten glass beneath her war paint. Her lips were pulled into a taut line, her good hand gripping the hilt of the dagger sheathed at her waist in a white-knuckled fist.

Clarke had never seen the other girl appear so severe - not even when she'd stormed out of her tent to confront Nyko a couple of weeks ago. The intensity of her demeanor shook Clarke to the core.

If she hadn't known any better, she would've sworn the other girl suffered from some acute form of... jealousy.

That couldn't be right, though.

"Clarke," Lincoln spoke, placing his hand on her shoulder to turn her back to face him again. She turned to meet his gentle gaze with a forced smile.

"You are walking now," he observed, eyes alight with pride. She nodded, smiling more genuinely now as she shook Lexa's expression from her memory.

He took her hand and led her over to the circling of benches surrounding the empty gathering area. She sat down on one of them, settling against the cool stone as Lincoln made to straddle the same bench.

He faced her expectantly.
"Tell me everything," he prompted excitedly. "How are you feeling? How is your leg? Have you been treated well?"

She smiled at the barrage of questions and chuckled lightly in response. She simultaneously tried to ignore the sight of a rigid Lexa moving to stand a couple of yards behind her in her right periphery along with Anya and Ryder.

"Oh, geez," Clarke huffed, shaking her head a little as she gathered her thoughts. "Where to begin? Let's see..."

Before she could continue, she was suddenly pushed forward as a force collided with her back. Small arms suddenly encircled her from behind.

Her head whipped around to glance wildly over her right shoulder at the source of the impact.

Grinning joyously with his head tilted at a comical angle to meet her gaze was Belou.

He was naked save for that same loin cloth - which Clarke believed was something of a style preference at this point - and his braids had been cropped off so that he now sported a bushy head of black hair.

Before she could even take a breath, Lexa was suddenly towering over the two of them from behind with a firm hand on the boy's shoulder.


She looked down at him with a raised eyebrow in an expression now concealed by her mask once again. Belou quailed a little under his Commander's gaze but reluctantly removed his arms from around Clarke.

"Sha, Heda," he told her in a small voice. "Moba."
Lexa nodded in acceptance of his apology and watched as the boy scurried over to hide behind Anya who concealed the boy with a grin.

The Commander gave a stiff nod for the two to proceed and turned on her heels to stride back to stand beside her warriors.

She didn't meet Clarke's gaze at all.

Furrowing her brows in confusion, Clarke turned back to face Lincoln who had watched the scene unfold with a broad grin on his face. He enclosed her left hand in both his, nodding at her to continue.

Clarke cleared her throat.

"Right," she said, shaking her head a little. "Well, I'm doing surprisingly well, actually. I'm making good progress with my injuries, I think, and everyone's been super patient with me." She smiled as he absorbed her words in earnest.

"It's been really great, actually. But I've been worried about you," she finished in a whisper, concern now lighting her gaze on him.

He shook his head and brushed her off with an easy smile.

"Do not worry about me, skai prisa," he told her just as quietly. "I have been treated fairly. Guarded away in my tent during the day for my own protection." He snorted at that, rolling his eyes in exaggerated annoyance.

Clarke chuckled quietly at his exasperation. She, too, was becoming tired of the excessive measures taken to guard her every second of the day.

The two fell into silence for a few moments, regarding each other with peaceful expressions. Two comrades united, once again.

"I need to thank you, Lincoln. Truly," Clarke spoke after a beat, fighting the sudden tightness in her
"You did more for me in those few days than most people have done throughout my entire life. I don't think I can ever repay you for that." Tears threatened to spill over now.

Lincoln shook his head a little, looking down at his hands enclosing hers with a somewhat bashful expression. After another minute, he met her gaze again, eyes alight with impassioned intensity.

"You do not have to repay me," he replied firmly, kind eyes shining as they locked onto watery blues. "Just live, skai prisa. Be free. Do not let your worries consume you."

He moved a hand to swipe the stray tear running freely down her cheek.

"That is all I will ever ask of you."

Clarke choked back a sob as she threw her arm around his neck. He returned her grasp with enthusiasm.

"Mochof, Linkon," she responded, sniffling a little. "I'll try my best."

He pulled back with a huge grin on his face at her use of Trigedasleng. She returned it sheepishly.

Before they could say anything else, a chorus of shouts suddenly sounded through the air around them.

"Heda!"

"Heda, thri Azgeda gona gaf yu in!"

Clarke whipped around to see Lexa, Anya and Ryder hurrying towards the voices.
Lincoln sprang up to follow them, jogging towards the three warriors making their way back through the marketplace. When he settled in at Lexa's heels, though, she suddenly whipped around to halt his movement.

"No!" she shouted fiercely, eyes blazing as they locked onto his face. "You stay with Clarke!! Do not move from this spot. Understood?"

He clenched his hands into fists at his sides but nodded curtly, turning on his heels to make his way back to the still-seated blonde. Lexa's eyes bored into his back until he came to stand in front of Clarke, obscuring her view of the Commander.

By the time Clarke stood up and moved to his side, the Commander and her warriors were gone. The marketplace had emptied, too, its occupants having followed their Commander in haste.

What the hell was going on?

Clarke knew enough Trigedasleng at this point to figure out that there were Ice Nation warriors nearby, but she couldn't discern the rest of what had been said.

She needed to figure it out quickly.

She made to follow the procession of people, getting a couple of steps before she felt a strong hand come down on her shoulder.

"No, Clarke," Lincoln said firmly, stopping her in her tracks and turning her around. "We stay here. Heda's orders." He pursed his lips and Clarke noticed a look of disgruntlement cross his features - clearly displeased by the orders he'd been given.

She saw her chance.

"Lincoln, come on," she pleaded, removing his hand from her shoulder to tug him along. "If she doesn't see us disobeying her, then we aren't technically disobeying her, really. Right?"

She cocked a mischievous eyebrow in his direction.
He shook his head for a minute, wearing a wry grin and placing his hands on his hips as he marveled at the blonde's audacity.

"You are some creature, skai prisa. You know that?" he teased her with a chuckle.

Then, after a moment:

"Alright, follow me."

He took her hand again and made a beeline for the trees on the outside of the marketplace to their left, pulling Clarke along with him.

Once they made their way up the small incline that met the tree line, Lincoln turned to the right and hurried in the direction Lexa and the villagers had gone, Clarke stumbling along behind him.

Clarke kept her eyes on the ground as they went along, making sure she didn't trip over a tree root or something of that nature as she walked. Her leg fervently protested every step, but she steeled her jaw against the pain and kept pushing forward.

After a couple minutes, Lincoln suddenly came to a stop and pulled her down into a crouch behind a boulder propped up against a large oak tree.

She shot a side-long glare at him for the lack of warning but he didn't seem to notice it. His eyes were glued on the scene before them as he peeked over the rock.

Clarke turned her head to look for herself and her eyes widened immediately.

Straight ahead of them and down the hill several yards at the main entrance of TonDC was Lexa, face-to-face with three large men dressed in the fur-lined uniforms of the Ice Nation.

Two of the men appeared to be flanking the third - a man whose features Clarke couldn't quite discern apart from the long hair tied behind his head - who stood just a few feet in front of the
Lexa, who had removed the brace from around her shoulder for whatever reason - perhaps not to appear weak, Clarke thought -, was flanked closely behind by Anya, Ryder, Gustus, and Indra, who all looked beyond tense in the wake of their newest visitors' arrival. A small force of warriors stood behind the generals, guarding the main entrance of TonDC and the villagers within its walls.

A twig snapped right next to Clarke and her head whipped around to see Belou now crouching beside her, a finger pressed to his lips with eyes wide as saucers. He pressed against her right side and rested his tiny hand on her shoulder.

Her heart pounded as she shook her head at his having snuck up on her, but she quickly shook it off and turned back to the scene before them.

"Prince Roan of Azgeda," Lexa's voice wafted up to them, flat and laced with authority. "What an unexpected surprise."

Her hand was resting loosely on the hilt of her sword, her posture impossibly straight as she regarded the men before her.

The air was practically solidified with the amount of intensity thickening it.

"What brings you to TonDC?"

The man, Prince Roan, seemed to be oblivious to the strain, his posture incredibly relaxed as he regarded the scene in front of him with ease.

"Hello, Commander," his gravelly voice quipped somewhat mockingly. He placed his hands on his hips. "In light of recent events, I normally wouldn't venture so far into such...hostile...territory -"

His musings were cut off by a menacing growl from Indra.

Lexa held up her hand to silence the warrior, nodding for Roan to continue.
"As I was saying," he continued, raising his eyebrow in gesture of nonchalance, "I wouldn't normally entertain such a visit. However, my interests have been peaked, as of late."

He took a step towards Lexa who stood unmoved as a flurry of warriors made to draw their swords behind her.

"Tell me, what is this I hear of a golden-haired princess from the sky living among your ranks?"

Chapter End Notes

sorry not sorry for that lil cliffhanger lolol
Trig Translations:
-seken - second
-No, goufa. Kamp raun Onya. Set raun der na kom ai tel yu. - No, child. Go to Anya. Wait over there until I tell you.
-Heda, thri Azgeda gona gaf yu in! - Commander, three Ice Nation warriors seek you/your presence!
Clarke's heart nearly stopped at the prince's words.

Her blood pounded in her ears as she watched Lexa and her warriors visibly stiffen. Lexa clench her jaw as she tightened the grip on her sword just a little - a move probably unnoticed by anyone who didn't pay close attention to the Commander.

Clarke was always paying attention, though.

Lincoln went rigid beside her, as well, placing a hand over her left one that rested on the rock in front of them. He caught her gaze and gave her hand a sympathetic squeeze.

Belou pressed impossibly closer to her, laying his head on her right shoulder and whimpering a little. She rested her head on top of his for a moment, attempting to reassure him.

"Where did you hear such rumors from?" Lexa inquired, voice carefully bored and impassive. She
sounded like she was attempting to flesh out the petulant scheme of a child caught red-handed in misconduct.

Roan chuckled humorlessly in response, seemingly un-phased by the amount of warriors ready to attack him at a moment's notice.

"Please, Lexa. Don't -"

His words were cut off by Anya drawing her sword to wield it threateningly in his direction, taking an aggressive step to stand at Lexa's right side. She barred her teeth in warning at him.

"You will address the Commander with respect, branwoda," she hissed menacingly, ignoring the two Ice Nation warriors who drew their weapons in response to her haste.

"Or I will cut you down where you stand."

Lexa shot up a hand to halt her advance, sending her warrior a deadly glare of foreboding.

Anya reluctantly lowered her weapon after a moment, taking a small step back as she growled in frustration.

Clarke smiled a little to herself. She was beginning to admire Anya's tenacity, grateful not to be the only one who seemed to ruffle the warrior's feathers all the time.

"My apologies, Commander," he amended somewhat begrudgingly. "I was just hoping we could by-pass the pretenses and have an honest conversation here."

The prince shrugged, seemingly unperturbed as he crossed his arms in front of him. His posture was beyond lazy, oozing of overconfidence and nonchalance.

Clarke wanted to smack the stupid smirk he now sported right off of his face.

Without further preamble, he bent to pull something from the inside of his left boot. Clarke paled
when he held it out to Lexa.

In his hands, on display for the world to see, was half of her apparently-broken wristband. It was wrapped in a piece of fabric cut out from the parachute of the pod.

Where in the hell had he gotten that?!

"Like I said," he continued, holding the items out further. "I'm not in the mood for pretenses."

Clarke noticed Anya's eyes seem to light in recognition - having been the only one of the Trikru other than Lincoln to have seen the wreckage, and most likely recognizing the type of metal the bracelet had been crafted from - while Lexa's jaw locked with a nearly-audible snap, immediately having deduced where the items came from.

Clarke's head began to swim as she watched Lexa take the items from his hands gingerly in both of hers - though favoring her left hand so as not to agitate her injured right arm and shoulder too much. The Commander appraised them for a moment.

"You bring me a piece of scrap metal wrapped in cloth and expect me to entertain your fantasies, Roan?" she asked drily, quirking an eyebrow in an otherwise thoroughly unimpressed expression.

The prince's posture immediately went rigid at that, his features noticeably hardening as he clenched his fists at his sides.

"You and I both know damn well that's not just a piece of scrap metal, Commander," he responded in a near-hiss. "What are you playing at?"

Lexa's features steeled into hot iron as she took a step towards him, her demeanor one of unquestionable authority as she advanced. She wrapped the wristband in cloth and handed it off to Gustus behind her, who pocketed the items quickly - much to Roan's dismay - as she came to stand impossibly taller before the prince. Fury emanated from her in waves.

Though Roan didn't cower, Clarke thought she saw a flash of uncertainty cross his features for the briefest of moments.
"What am I playing at, gona?" she questioned menacingly, tone flat and deadly as she stared him straight in the eye.

"I believe the only one playing games here is your mother. Or have you already forgotten the warrior she sent to capture me in her stead?" Lexa shook her head with a look of barely-contained disgust as she continued to confront him.

"You and your clan are towing a dangerous line now, Roan. Have you no foresight into the kind of retaliation your haiplana's careless action warrants? Have you no respect for the laws that remain sovereign in our lands?"

The prince was noticeably uncomfortable now, working his jaw back and forth as the Commander's words jabbed into him like knives.

"You and your queen seem to forget that we have a much larger enemy to conquer - that the Maunon will not fall at the hands of a force that crumbles from within its own ranks. While I am on the subject of your unfortunate forgetfulness, though, let me also remind you of the tradition that has driven our people to action since before you were born."

The Commander stepped up to be chest-to-chest with the man who seemed to have all but lost the last traces of his confidence. Despite his stature being noticeably larger than Lexa's, his seemed to pale in comparison to the smaller girl's all-powerful aura.

"Jus drein jus daun."

Her words seemed to set off an immediate reaction from the warriors behind her.

They began to repeat the words as a kind of chant, sounding off in a deadly thunder of warning to the three opposing warriors before them.

Roan looked close to relenting when a terrified scream suddenly ripped through the air, effectively silencing the chanting.

"RIPA!!"
Though Clarke had no idea what the word meant, she watched as the scene changed before her eyes.

Every single warrior unsheathed their weapon and moved to flank the Commander in a defensive crouch, poised to attack. Even the Ice Nation warriors now moved to be by Lexa's side.

The Commander took a step forward and began firing orders at the warriors behind her, forcing them to fan out to better scan the area. Before Lexa had finished her last command, though, she was brutally interrupted by the agonized cry of a warrior on the fringes of the group.

Clarke watched in paralyzed horror as the man was dragged off screaming into the opposite tree line by some sort of creature - far too huge to be a man, though with the frame of one - that had him by the neck.

Barely a breath later, several more of the creatures emerged over the tree line and began descending upon the group of warriors ready to meet their advance.

Belou suddenly screamed in terror beside her, watching as the creatures barreled through the first line of warriors who had moved to form a blockade around the Commander, her generals, and the prince.

It was then that time seemed to still before the blonde once again as she locked eyes with the Commander.

Lexa, apparently having heard the young boy's scream, had whipped around to find its source and now stood frozen as green locked onto terrified blue. Her eyes flashed confusion, comprehension, anger, and, finally, complete and utter dread as she took in the sight of the three figures crouched behind the rock at the tree line.

"Clarke..."

The blonde recognized the formation of her name on the other girl's lips - as it was a sight she had come to memorize in recent days - and the whisper seemed to carry straight into the blonde's very core. It was louder and more profound than any of the shouts or slashes of blades that rang out around them.

Lexa made to approach them as time suddenly seemed to start back up again, but her path was cut
off as her warriors enclosed her in a protective circle of their ranks.

Clarke shook herself out of the moment that had just passed between the two of them, coming back to consciousness somewhat.

She watched as the group of thirty or so Trikru and Azgeda warriors were swarmed by a smaller faction of those nightmarish creatures. Chaos erupted as both groups began to hack into each other, clashing swords and cries of pain and desperation filling the air in a murderous cacophony of sound.

Apparently having been attracted by Belou's yell, as well, two of the creatures broke off and started to climb the incline to the large rock the three still crouched behind.

"RUN!!" Lincoln yelled, abruptly pulling Clarke off the ground and dragging her back into the forest at a dead sprint. Belou fell into place beside them as the creatures made chase.

Throwing one last glance over her shoulder, Clarke's eyes locked onto Lexa in the bloody melee as the other girl sliced the head off of one of the creatures she'd made work of, watching as its body dropped to the ground a little away from its head with a sickening thud.

The Commander frantically glanced past the warriors still surrounding her to look in the blonde's direction, watching helplessly as the three disappeared into the forest, the two creatures thundering after them.

Not a second later, though, the brunette was once again enraptured in another fierce battle with one of the largest of the attackers. The blonde watched in horrified fascination as Lexa twirled and immediately removed both of its arms in a figure-eight motion with her blade, loosing a fierce cry as she did so.

Clarke wrenched her head forward and away from the Commander just in time to avoid tripping over a tree root protruding from the ground in her path.

She, Lincoln, and Belou barreled through the woods as the creatures inhumanly snarled into the air and hastily continued after them.

The sun was beginning to set, and Clarke found the beauty of the heavenly beams of light bursting through the canopy around them to be a taunting dream in their current predicament.
As they ran, Clarke processed in the back of her mind that the creatures giving chase were, in fact, men of some sort; larger, deformed, and seemingly deranged - but men, all the same.

Her blood pounded in her ears as adrenaline pushed her forwards, urging her faster than she'd ever gone in her injured state. She couldn't think about the pain right now - she had to just keep moving.

The group suddenly came upon a wide but shallow creek that interrupted the scape of the forest before them.

At their painfully blistering pace, they'd managed to put a little distance between themselves and their pursuers, but not nearly enough for them to slow down at all as they splashed through the shallow creek. Clarke narrowly avoided slipping on a rock while crossing it, but Lincoln kept her steady as they sprinted on.

Belou glided over the water like a ghost and came to lead the two of them on as they were engulfed in trees once more.

"We need to find a place to hide!!" Lincoln shouted breathlessly as they ran, Belou guiding them further into the forest.

Clarke nodded, too out of breath to respond.

She heard the sounds of the men splashing through creek behind them, and immediately cursed the fact that they still hadn't put enough distance between themselves and their pursuers. They had no weapons to fight back if the creatures caught up to them now, either.

Their only option was to keeping running.

Suddenly, Belou made a beeline to the left and signaled them to follow as he raced along. Lincoln and Clarke hurried after him immediately.

What felt like hours of nonstop running - but was probably only about two minutes - later, Belou stopped in a crouch at the base of a large tree and pointed animatedly at a metal handle sticking up through the foliage on the forest floor. It would've been completely hidden from view had the boy not known its exact location.
Without question, Lincoln moved to pull the hatch open with a grunt and Belou scurried inside and all-but-slid down the ladder leading into darkness. Clarke was nearly thrown into the hatch by Lincoln, and she quickly gathered her footing and raced down the ladder after the boy.

She was engulfed in darkness as she moved away from the base of the ladder to make room for Lincoln - who unceremoniously fell to the ground with a grunt as he slammed the door to the hatch shut over his head.

The sound of painfully labored breathing was the only thing to be heard as the three sprawled on the cool metal floor in pitch blackness, waiting in horrified anticipation for some form of retribution to come for them.

"Okay, what in the actual hell was that?!" Clarke asked, voice rising with residual panic that left her slightly dizzy.

She watched as Belou began to light a plethora candles that sat atop a wooden coffee table in the center of the room. He'd miraculously managed to find a box of matches in the dark, and his mood was annoyingly chipper given their current circumstance.

They were in what appeared to be some kind of metal-lined bunker - most likely left behind in the wake of the bombings.
It wasn't very large, just big enough to fit a two-seater leather couch on the right wall across from a bunk-bed tucked away in a nook across from it, the coffee table situated equally between them. The place was empty save for the furniture, and Clarke didn't think it was properly suited for survival if that was truly its intended purpose.

The three of them had listened with bated breath for any sign of the Reapers. Lincoln had torn a piece off of the bottom of his shirt to tie around the handle of the hatch door, looping it around and securing it in place around the top wrung of the ladder as a makeshift lock for the door. Though they knew they still had no chance of fighting the creatures off if they were found, they felt a bit more at ease now with the added barrier between them and the hostiles.

After awhile, though, it became abundantly clear that they hadn't been found - and most likely weren't going to be any time soon.

In the meantime, Lincoln had asked Belou how he'd managed to find the place, and the boy had gone on excitedly in Trigedasleng about how he and Zenya (who was apparently completing some type of apprenticeship in Polis at the moment) had come across it a couple months back. They'd also found a second more well-stocked bunker a couple miles away - much deeper into the forest than they currently were.

The warrior now sat on the leather sofa with his elbows resting on his knees as he looked to the blonde currently sprawled out on the bottom bunk with her head turned towards him.

Clarke had barely made it over to the bed once she'd seen it, fighting against her body to maintain consciousness. The pain was overwhelming her, and they had no means of getting water - or anything else, for that matter.

She supposed she'd just have to breath through it.

"Ripa. The Reapers," Lincoln answered her, voice flat and exhausted. "They are more demon than man."

Clarke groaned, turning her head to stare at the metallic bottom of the bed above her.

"What happened to them? Some kind of radiation poisoning?" she asked, a little bit of scholarly interest coloring her tone.
Lincoln shook his head in her periphery.

"We do not know," he answered steadily, brows furrowing. "No one has ever gotten close enough to study them. They have a habit of...consuming their victims." His lip curled in disgust.

Clarke's stomach lurched as she whipped her head around to gawk at him.

"So...you're telling me that we just got chased for who-knows-how-long by murderous, raving, cannibalistic lunatics only to get stuck in a bunker from roughly 100 years ago, and no one even knows what's wrong with them?!" she asked, voice incredulous with disbelief and fear.

"Sha," he answered her, shrugging casually.

Clarke nodded her head slowly, trying to come to terms with this new bit of information.

"Well," she quipped, feeling the need to aim for lightness, "that was a lovely way to spend the evening, don't you think? I've certainly had a great time. Truly. In fact, I don't think I've ever had more fun in my entire life."

Lincoln threw his head back and laughed heartily at her commentary. Clarke smiled a little to herself at his reaction.

Belou looked curiously between the two of them.

They fell into a strained silence after a moment, the instance of levity now forgotten.

Clarke felt a dip in the bed as Belou crawled in beside her, tucking his head into her wrapped right shoulder. She brought her left hand over to gently stroke his forearm where it rested across her stomach with his small fingers clutching at her side, hoping to comfort the boy in some way.

After a few minutes, she felt his breathing slow as he fell into a deep sleep pressed against her.
Clarke began to go back through the events that led them to the bunker.

"Lincoln?" she called to him, voice barely more than a whisper.

"Sha, Klark?" he replied just as softly.

"What does 'Maunon' mean?" she inquired quizzically. She'd been stuck on that particular part of Lexa's speech to Roan for some time now.

He was silent for several moments. His expression was suddenly devoid of all emotion as he looked at her.

"The Mountain," he answered finally, his voice a steely whisper. "It has loomed over our people for as long as I can remember. It does nothing but suck the life out of everything in its shadow."

She met his hardened gaze over Belou’s sleeping form as he watched her from across the room.

"In fact, we are too close to it for my liking right now," he told her, brows furrowing in worry. "We must get back to TonDC at first light. Otherwise, I cannot promise to keep you both safe."

Clarke frowned at him.

"What about the...ripa? Won't they still be out there?" He shook his head at her.

"No. They always disappear after awhile." He paused for a moment, mirroring Clarke's frown now.

"We do not know where they go - or what, for that matter, calls them away. But they always go." His gaze was far away now.

"It is as if they are not in control of what they are doing, as if they cannot truly see who they are hunting. It is unlike anything I have ever encountered before."
He sounded thoroughly disturbed now.

"I'm beginning to think that maybe my people are safer up in space," Clarke mused after a moment, regarding Lincoln thoughtfully.

"They probably are," he responded immediately, tone casual as he shrugged. "But didn't you say your Ark was dying? That they would die with it if they weren't brought to the ground?" He was genuinely curious as he regarded her.

She sighed, nodding a little reluctantly.

"It is, and they will..." she trailed off for a moment, lost in her musings.

"But...which is more cruel: for them to die believing that Earth is uninhabitable and that they are the last of humanity - to die comfortably in their rooms thinking that they are finding some kind of closure for the human race? Or to bring them to the ground and let them find out that they've been grossly misled their entire lives - to condemn them to die on this planet at the hands of something straight out of their worst nightmare? Which is more cruel, Lincoln?"

His mouth fell open a little as he gaped at her words. She practically saw the wheels turning in his head as he contemplated what she'd said.

After what felt like hours of impregnated silence, he finally spoke.

"Is it...really your decision to make, skai prisa?" he asked almost hesitantly, voice soft and incredibly gentle.

Clarke closed her eyes at the tears beginning to brim within them. Her heart sunk to the deepest and darkest recesses of her chest as her soul began to wail in all-encompassing agony - and something close to acceptance.

She looked back to him with the depth of her despair fully visible in the blue of her eyes, a small smile tinged in unbidden tragedy written on her features.
"It became my decision the moment they threw me away in that pod."
A Moment of Weakness

Chapter Notes

Such horrific events that happened in Orlando yesterday morning. But, man, am I sending my love to the victims' friends and families... So much heartache. But there are still so many reasons to be thankful - to be happy. I think it gives us all the more reason to really fight for our happiness, though, don't you think? There's still so much love and goodness out there. It's simply up to us to find it and make more of it for ourselves.

I hope you all have a happy - and SAFE - Monday!!

Enjoy (:

**also just noticed this fic is officially two weeks old!! Lolol it's the little things I guess (: **)  

The hatch opened with a small thud as Lincoln shoved the door open and onto the forest floor.

He climbed out first, making it known that he intended to scan their surroundings before he let Clarke and Belou follow him.
The two of them waited at the base of the ladder, listening for any signs of struggle.

After the longest minute Clarke had ever had to endure, Lincoln finally signaled for them to climb up. Clarke let Belou go first so that she could take her time behind him.

She really wasn't feeling too great at this point.

They'd slept in shifts for the past eight-or-so hours, waiting until mid-morning to emerge from the hatch, just in case. Clarke was beginning to feel a bit dehydrated, realizing that she probably hadn't had any water in at least 15 hours. Add on the fact that she was hungry and experiencing frequent after-shocks of pain from their sprint through the forest, and it left Clarke steadily weakening with every passing second.

She made it about ten feet out of the hatch before she collapsed on her knees, fighting against the blackening edges enclosing her vision. Lincoln was crouching by her side in an instant, moving the hair from her face and trying to get her to look at him.

"Let me help you, skai prisa," he told her kindly, cupping her cheek. "I promised that I would get you both safely back to TonDC. Let me make good on that promise."

She simply nodded her consent to him, allowing her aching body to be scooped into his arms as she fought against the blackness.

She made sure to ask him a small favor before she lost herself completely, leaning up to whisper into his ear before closing her eyes against the dizzy spells now overtaking her.

She was weaving in and out of consciousness.
She vaguely registered splashing sounds as they made their way back through what she assumed was the creek they'd crossed before.

Clarke was losing a battle with her own body.

She didn't know what she was fighting against, though.

Voices. Too many voices.

One louder than the rest, calling to her.

Such a beautiful voice. Her favorite voice.

The only one she could hear.

"Clarke? Clarke?!

"What happened?! Is she okay?! Is she hurt?!"

"Clarke!!"
Clarke opened her eyes slowly, fighting against the fog that still lingered in her brain.

Her eyelids were heavy, and her body still felt beyond weak despite the fact that she'd clearly been out for quite some time now.

With a start, she realized that the thick bed of furs she was currently resting on weren't her own. It was a subtle difference, but one that registered as important within her mind.

As she blinked her eyes open, she noticed that the ceiling above her was quite different, netting and fabrics cascading around the bed in a manner that suggested its occupant desired privacy.

Clarke registered someone in her right periphery, and she turned her head a little to better see who it was.
Sitting in a chair by her bedside was Lexa, hunched forward with her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands. Her sling was, once again, gone from her right shoulder and Clarke figured the girl had probably just thrown it away by now.

Clarke swallowed, immediately recognizing that this probably wasn't a sight she was supposed to see.

The Commander was never supposed to show any sign of weakness to anyone, and the only thing Clarke saw when she looked at her in that moment was a girl whose posture spoke of someone who'd lost every battle she'd ever fought - the very epitome of weakness, in fact.

Clarke closed her eyes again and decided to approach the situation differently out of respect for the other girl.

She coughed, satisfied when she heard the unmistakable sound of Lexa immediately straightening in her chair at the noise. She felt the other girl lean over a little, pressing into the bed as she regarded the blonde.

"Clarke?" she asked tentatively, voice incredibly gentle. Clarke blinked her eyes open and turned to look at the girl once again.

She now noticed that Lexa's hair was completely devoid of braids, cascading around her shoulders in soft waves. Her normally-buttoned coat sat unbuttoned on her torso, revealing a tight-fitting grey tank top underneath.

Her face was without war paint, her eyes - though currently ringed in dark circles that screamed of constant unrest - were the softest shade of green Clarke had ever seen, the color she would imagine the most gorgeous foliage in all of the forest to be had she ever been able to find it in person. She knew she'd never have to search for such a sight ever again, though, as the color was so vividly captured within the depths of Lexa's eyes for Clarke to see whenever she dared to meet them.

The visceral beauty of the girl before her looking so undone left Clarke nearly breathless, as she was rendered beyond-speechless.

How had she never seen it before this moment? She'd known that Lexa was beautiful, sure - that much was obvious to anyone who'd ever looked at the girl.
But this...

Clarke was now certain that Lexa was the pinnacle of goddesses to be worshiped in only the most pristine of temples her mind could conjure, tucked away to be cherished in that sacred part of her psychy at all times.

She only wished she'd realized it sooner.

"Hey," Clarke whispered after a moment, forcing herself out of her marveling. "Wh-where am I?"

Lexa's eyes went from overwhelmingly worried to exceptionally relieved in a nanosecond. Her posture noticeably relaxed as she sat back in the chair a little.

She was still barely a foot from Clarke, though.

"My tent," she answered softly. Clarke didn't believe she'd ever heard the other girl's voice sound so small.

Clarke processed the words for a moment.

"So, that must mean that this," she began, brushing the fur with the fingertips of her left hand, "is your bed?"

Lexa visibly swallowed as she gave the blonde a curt nod, their eyes still locked.

Clarke smiled a little to herself.

"Ah, well," she said, tone light, "that explains why it's so much more comfortable than mine is."

Lexa stiffened immediately.
"Your bed is uncomfortable?" she asked, extremely displeased by the news. "Why didn't you say something sooner? I would've had more furs brought to you had I known - "

"Lexa, stop," Clarke instructed, cutting off the other girl's frantic ramblings. "It was just a joke. My bed's just fine, thank you very much." She gave the girl a more noticeable smile in the attempt to placate her.

Lexa nodded after a beat, seeming to accept this.

"You have strange jokes, Clarke of the Sky People," she stated firmly, pursing her lips after she did so. Her eyes seemed to harden as she spoke the next words.

"You also seem to have a strange perception of what following orders means..." Lexa trailed off, looking exceptionally unimpressed - though somehow maintaining her careful stoicism. Clarke was thoroughly surprised that the Commander wasn't just downright furious with her - that's what she'd prepared herself for, anyways.

She'd take annoyance over Lexa's fury any day, though.

"Tell me - is it common for your people to do the exact opposite of what your leader asks of you? To do the one thing they specifically ask you not to do? Or is that just you, I wonder?"

She raised an eyebrow at Clarke, mask firmly in place as her eyes bored into the blonde's. Clarke winced at the statement.

She knew she'd probably get some flack for their little...mishap earlier.

"See, about that - " she immediately stopped herself as she remembered something in a panic.

"Wait a minute, where's Lincoln? Are they - are he and Belou safe? Are they - ?"

She was silenced by the look Lexa gave her in response, the brunette's eyes steeling even further at
the mention of Lincoln's name for whatever reason.

"They are both fine," she answered flatly, jawing working a little as she did so. Her voice was much too cold for Clarke's liking. "Both back in their respective tents, unharmed. Both reprimanded for their thoughtless disobedience."

Clarke gulped at that.

"Are they...are they in trouble? Will they be punished?" she questioned, brows immediately furrowing in concern. "It was my idea to disobey you, Commander. If anyone is going to be punished, it should be me. In fact, I'll take whatever punishments they get - "

Lexa stopped her again, this time holding up her good hand to silence Clarke as she did so.

She'd addressed Lexa as the Commander - something she rarely ever did anymore -, so that's who she was currently going to be dealing with in this moment.

Lexa closed her eyes for a moment, putting her arm back down to lay it stiffly in her lap.

When she opened them again to meet Clarke's, they were as guarded as the blonde had ever seen them.

"The child did no wrong. He was simply an accomplice to your disobedience," the Commander told her, voice null of all emotion as she spoke. "As far as Lincoln is concerned, he will be under constant guard until he proves capable of actually being able to follow orders. I will not seek further punishment for him though..." Lexa trailed off again, swallowing harshly as she did so.

"He was absolved of any wrongdoings in my book the moment he brought you back safely... I do not wish to speak of this incident further, though. I don't have the energy right now."

With that, Clarke watched the mask fall away from her expression once more, leaving a vulnerable and imploring Lexa staring back at her.

"Just, please, do not keep disobeying me, Clarke. I can only defend your actions to my warriors for
so long, and...it only puts you in more danger when you do so."

Lexa's eyes were a steely green as they seared into Clarke's with utmost intensity.

"I will not have that."

Clarke simply nodded in response, unable to speak momentarily as she was still a bit stunned by the meaning behind the other girl's words.

She suddenly remembered something - something that she hoped would diffuse the tensions between them somewhat.

"Hold on just a sec," she told Lexa, reaching around into her back pocket to dig for its contents.

After a moment, she held the wild flowers she'd had Lincoln pick out in her left hand to Lexa, who stared at them in bewildered confusion. Though they were a little crushed from the journey, Clarke was relatively satisfied with the little yellow flowers Lincoln had chosen, which she hadn't been able to appraise until now.

"For you," she said, smiling sweetly at the baffled girl. "Consider this a peace-offering and...an apology, I guess. For all past and future instances of disobedience."

She winked gratuitously at the other girl who continued to balk at her.

Lexa seemed to have the same reaction to Clarke's wink that the blonde had on the rock the day before. Her mouth fell open a little bit as her eyes widened in shock.

She seemed to shake herself out of it after a moment, though, as her cheeks now obviously displayed a heated flush. The brunette gently took the flowers from Clarke's grasp - careful not to brush the blonde's skin with her fingertips, Clarke noted - with a bashful smile, eyes down-turned.

"Thank you, Clarke," the girl whispered thickly, turning her eyes brimming with genuine thanks - and affection - back to meet Clarke's. "They're...so beautiful."
Clarke nodded in response, smiling softly at the other girl.

Without warning, Lexa immediately rose from the chair with the flowers in her hand as she hastily made her way over to the table on the far side of the tent. Clarke watched in confusion as the brunette began to rustle through the contents of the desk, searching all of its crevices for something.

"What are you doing, Lexa?" Clarke asked, narrowing her eyes at the other girl who continued to rifle about.

"Looking for a vase," she answered, back still turned to Clarke as she continued to search. "They need to be put in water right away."

Clarke closed her eyes and smiled to herself at the words. She very nearly hummed in contentment as the sweetness of the gesture left her nearly-aching for the other girl, her heart warming her entire body as affection overwhelmed her.

Her soul was practically aflame at this point.

When she opened her eyes again, Lexa was approaching her with a plate of food in one hand, the vase of wild flowers in the other. She set the vase on the large table a few feet to the right of her bed - the one that sported a bunch of maps and schematics of the lands - and moved to sit back down in the chair, grabbing for the glass of water that had been waiting on the bedside table.

She held the items out to Clarke with an expectant expression.

Clarke took them gratefully from the girl and allowed Lexa to prop her up on a couple of pillows in the bed.

She was overcome with the realization that she was all-but-drowning in the tide that had been threatening to pull her into its path for days now, and she found that she was utterly and completely powerless to stop it at this point.
After a half hour of Clarke devouring her meal in silence under the watch of a patient Lexa, the blonde cleared her throat as she set the plate beside her on the bed. Lexa took the empty glass from her and placed it back on the bedside table.

"So," she began, somewhat awkwardly. "What did I miss?"

Lexa rolled her eyes, shaking her head a little. She looked the picture of exasperation, and Clarke had to bite down a laugh at the brunette's comical expression.

"Lincoln informed me that he told you about the ripa - that you also know of the Maunon now, as well," Lexa responded in a somewhat-disapproving manner, raising an eyebrow at the blonde.

Clarke simply nodded, not really wanting to say more - still afraid she might laugh at the other girl's obvious annoyance.

"Well, at least you are aware of them now, I suppose," Lexa conceded bitterly, sighing in what sounded like defeat. She pursed her lips a little before she continued.

"They, and the Azgeda, of course, are the reason that we will be leaving for Polis at first light tomorrow morning."

Clarke was momentarily stunned into silence at the information, any traces of humor immediately forgotten.

"Wait, what?" Clarke stuttered, brows furrowing in confusion as she regarded the other girl.

Lexa's jaw clenched a little.
"In light of...recent events, I have determined that it will be much safer for you within our capitol's walls," she stated matter-of-factly to the blonde now gawking at her. "We have much better defenses there, and I believe you will find the accommodations to your liking, as well... Besides, it was always the intended goal to bring you there eventually. My hand has simply been forced a little bit earlier than expected, that's all."

Clarke looked away from the other girl, considering her words for a moment.

"What...happened to Prince Roan?" she asked hesitantly, still not looking at Lexa.

"I detained him after we took care of the ripa. The warriors that escorted him were killed in the attacks," she responded steadily. Clarke could feel Lexa's eyes boring into her profile.

"I will use him to send a message to his queen."

Clarke's head snapped back around at that. She looked at the stoic Commander with furrowed brows.

"What kind of message?" she asked quietly, trying to discern the emotions hidden away in the other girl's eyes.

She found nothing.

"It is irrelevant right now," Lexa dismissed calmly, eyes searing into Clarke's. She seemed to be memorizing every part of the blonde's irises as she looked at her.

"Lincoln tells me that you are unsure of whether or not to contact your people anymore."

Clarke was stunned by the abrupt change of subject. She noticeably paled at the other girl's words.

Of course Lincoln had told his Commander that...
"I...yeah, I guess so," she admitted finally, shrugging a little. "I really just...don't know anymore." Her voice wavered as she spoke, revealing far too much that was supposed to be hidden within her words.

Lexa nodded after a moment, eyes never leaving Clarke's. The blonde could see sympathy and sorrow clearly displayed in the depths of green, the stoic mask utterly failing at hiding the girl's emotions now.

"I see," Lexa spoke softly, voice as gentle as Clarke had ever heard it.

In that moment, Clarke truly believed that Lexa understood every reservation she could possibly have in regards to dealing with her people. It suddenly felt as if no one else had ever quite been able to understand her in such a way until the Commander had come along.

"But, what about your home? Your people? Do you not wish to see your Ark again?" Genuine curiosity colored the brunette's tone as she spoke.

Clarke sighed.

"The Ark was never my home, Lexa," she told the girl matter-of-factly. "The people, though, sure."

Lexa looked exceptionally confused at that.

Clarke turned her body to face the brunette completely, swinging her legs off of the bed so that she could be face-to-face with the other girl, putting her left hand down on the furs to support her weight. The front of their legs were nearly touching as they sat regarding one another.

Lexa swallowed harshly once again, but managed to secure her mask back into place as she returned Clarke's heavy gaze.

"Home isn't a place, Lexa," she entreated, her voice soft yet impassioned as she did so. "Home is the people within that place... They are the ones who truly matter. They give us a place to go back to when we have nowhere else to go. They support us when we can't even begin to support ourselves - love us even when we feel that we're unlovable."
Her voice had risen with the fervor in her words.

"So, yeah, of course I'd like to see the Ark again, but not because I give a damn about the actual space station," Clarke told the other girl as if it should be obvious to her, voice nearly-fierce with the amount of emotion behind her words. "It's because I wouldn't want to lose my home - the people living within that space station. You know what I'm talking about, right, Lexa?"

Clarke's question was an innocent query, a sentence laced with so much genuine curiously that she knew she wouldn't be ignored.

Lexa closed her eyes at the blonde's words.

The two were enveloped in a thick silence that encompassed them in an impenetrable dome for a moment. Clarke stared at the other girl as she watched her jaw clench and un-clench, her left hand closing in a white-knuckled fist in her lap. Lexa's eyes remained closed as her entire posture spoke of her undergoing an intense battle within her own mind.

Finally, after what felt like hours to Clarke, the girl spoke, her eyes still glued shut.

"I...I suppose, by that definition, I had a home once, too, then," Lexa whispered, pain evident in her voice despite the quietness of her words. Clarke watched the other girl's throat work against some kind of strain.

After a beat, Lexa finally opened her eyes to meet Clarke's again.

The blonde was shaken to her core when she did so.

Deep within the previously-guarded emeralds before her was a kind of agony Clarke had never seen before. The soul within the window readily-opened for her to look through seemed to be rattling its cage in pure anguish, desperate to escape the chains that shackled it to the memories that haunted every fiber of its being. It cried out helplessly to its companion currently witnessing its fruitless struggle, longing to be saved from the never-ending hell it was almost-certainly enduring on a day-to-day basis - the kind of hell it seemed to the blonde that no human being ever deserved to be put through, regardless of the travesties they might have committed in their lifetime.

The kind of hell that she hadn't known existed until she'd seen it reflected in Lexa's eyes.
Clarke was sure that the frozen looks of hundreds of corpses couldn't hold a candle to this level of torment - not even for a second.

"Her name was Costia," Lexa continued, voice ever the haunted whisper it was before. "Four years ago, she was captured by the Ice Nation whose queen believed she knew my secrets. Because she was mine," Lexa swallowed, working against the constriction in her throat yet again, "they tortured her. Killed her. Cut off her head... Then, they delivered it to my bedside in Polis."

Clarke suddenly felt an overwhelming wave of nausea at the words. The depth of despair she felt on the other girl's behalf was endless.

"I thought I'd never get over the pain," Lexa said, working to secure her mask back into place. She was clearly fighting against emotions that threatened to ruin the careful facade she'd built around these memories over the years.

It was, perhaps, the most difficult struggle Clarke had ever seen the other girl undergo.

"But I did."

Clarke shook her head a little, feeling tears stinging the backs of her eyes now. Everything about the cold finality within Lexa's words was just so wrong - so tragic.

"How?" Clarke asked in disbelief, voice a painful whisper that came out more of a croak.

Lexa closed her eyes for moment, clenching her jaw against the unbidden emotions clearly written on her face.

When Lexa met her gaze again, though, Clarke saw that her soul had been completely tucked away, her mask firmly back in place as she regarded the shaken blonde.

"By recognizing it for what it is," she answered flatly, voice a little gravelly as she spoke above a whisper now.
"Weakness."

Clarke's jaw dropped open at that, struggling to comprehend what she'd just heard.

"What is?" she asked, tone incredulous as she scanned the other girl's face. "Love?!"

Lexa simply nodded in response.

Clarke was stunned into silence.

Her heartbeat shook her entire frame as the rest of her body seemed unable to handle the sorrow that sought to fill every inch of her now. It poked and prodded at her soul, wearing away at its edges as it began to tear down any protective barriers she'd been able to build.

She'd never thought that words would be able to break her heart in such a way.

She believed it was what those words meant for the girl in front of her that really got to her, though. Every inch of her ached for the devastated soul in front of her.

She didn't know what to do for the girl, though, as it seemed that nothing was ever going to be enough. But, she couldn't just sit there and continue to do nothing...

Suddenly making up her mind, she abruptly stood up without a word.

As she'd predicted, Lexa immediately rose, as well, eyeing her with a mix of confusion, concern, and something close to hurt. Clarke watched as the other girl scanned her face for a moment, frantically searching for whatever had caused such a disturbance to the blonde, seemingly trying to figure out what she could do to remedy it.

If Clarke wasn't mistaken, it also seemed as if Lexa was preparing herself for a rejection of some kind - that she believed that by allowing Clarke to chip away at her hardened exterior to begin to see the broken heart underneath, she had earned herself a cold shoulder, a turned back. Or, perhaps, she was simply looking for confirmation from the blonde in regards to her beliefs about love - that she truly was weak for ever having embraced that kind of feeling.
"Clarke?"

Her voice was tinged with as much concern as it was that ancient sadness that was as instantly recognizable as it was heart-wrenching.

Clarke simply stood frozen as emeralds continued to probe her features barely a foot from her.

"Clarke, what's wrong? What are you doing?" Lexa's voice was rising a little in worry, unsure what to do about the blonde blankly staring into her eyes.

It was that poignant worry the other girl expressed for her that finally forced Clarke out of her paralysis and pushed her to do what she'd been dreaming of doing for days now - what she'd made up her mind to do only moments ago.

Clarke removed her arm brace from around her shoulder - much to Lexa's befuddled dismay - and placed it on the bed behind her, turning back to meet the brunette's pained gaze.

Without so much as a word, Clarke closed the remaining distance between them and hugged Lexa with everything she had.

She wrapped her left arm around the other girl's shoulder to pull her in and brought her hand up so that she could lace her fingers in silky brown locks once her body was pressed against Lexa's - something she'd been wanting to do since she'd met the other girl, truthfully. Her injured right arm snaked around the brunette's torso, and she gently rested her hand on the small of the other girl's back.

She'd felt Lexa go rigid the minute she'd pulled her in as the girl's breath noticeably hitched.

The brunette continued to stay frozen for what felt like hours, Clarke pressing closer against her frame with every passing second - trying to thaw her in any way possible.

The blonde could feel the other girl's heart hammering against her own chest, almost as if it was trying to break free of its enclosure and permanently situate itself next to Clarke's.
After another prolonged moment of uncertainty, Lexa finally relieved Clarke of her worries and allowed her body to respond.

She slowly wrapped her left arm over Clarke's injured one and rested it on the blonde's mid-back, bringing her injured right arm up to allow her hand to grip tightly onto Clarke's left shoulder. She then nuzzled her face into the crook of Clarke's neck without hesitation, hiding it away in a layer of soft blonde.

They stood there for what felt like hours simply holding each other, allowing themselves to be put back together by the only person who seemed capable of doing such a job at this point.

After another moment, though, Clarke turned her head a little so that her right cheek was pressed against Lexa's hair as she spoke.

"Oh god, Lexa...I'm so sorry," Clarke whispered into the girl's hair, allowing all of the pain she felt for the other girl to seep into the words. "I can't even...imagine how that would've felt, I -" She struggled immensely with the lump now lodged in her throat.

"But... I need you to hear me when I say this, alright? If you never listen to a single thing I say ever again, I need you to hear what I'm going to say right now. I need you to really listen. Will you do that for me?"

She waited until she felt Lexa nod a little, her face still nuzzled into Clarke's neck.

"Good," she responded, lacing her fingers further into the brown locks currently weaving through them. They were the most amazing texture she'd ever had the privilege of feeling.

"Lexa, love is not weakness," she implored passionately, needing to make sure the other girl understood every syllable. "Your love for Costia is not weakness, do you hear me?"

She felt Lexa grip tightly onto her tunic where the girl's hand rested on her mid-back - the only form of confirmation she was going to get, Clarke thought.

"That love was what made fighting for peace in your lands - what made working to bring the clans
together, in the first place - *mean something*. That love gave you something to *fight for*, gave you something that would've made peace worthwhile *for you*. That's what you were fighting for - you were fighting for your right to have *your own peace*. A peace that every single human being deserves in their lifetime - a peace you've come closer to giving your people than any other leader before you ever has."

She felt wetness on her shoulder where Lexa's face was pressed against bare skin now, but she silently promised the other girl not to say anything about it - knew that she would never hold such a moment against her, no matter what.

"That's not selfish, and that sure as hell isn't *weakness*," Clarke continued, feeling every part of her body nearly trembling with the conviction she felt in her words. She knew Lexa could feel it, too, as close as they were now.

"Giving yourself that peace allows you to find your reason to *live*, Lexa. And if you'd just let yourself see it - if you'd let yourself feel something other than *obligation* - I think you'd come to figure out that *love* is that reason, that thing that gives people something worth *living for*. Do not ever diminish the power that it gives you - and so many others around you. Don't ever allow yourself to believe it is weakness."

She slowly began to massage Lexa's scalp in comforting circles as she brought the girl impossibly closer to her. She felt more than heard the small whimper that escaped the brunette's throat at her gentle ministrations.

"Love is *strength*. Love is *power*. And if ever there comes a time when love begins to equate to something even remotely close to weakness, then fine - so be it. If that day ever comes, I will *happily* be weak. In fact, let me never feel another ounce of strength in my body *ever again* if that becomes the case."

Lexa's hands on her back and shoulder were like a vice grip at this point, trying just as hard to bring the blonde as close against her as was humanly possible.

It was the first time Clarke would've ever dared to associate a kind of *neediness* with the other girl who, so often, offered herself up to fill everyone else's needs so readily - the girl who never seemed to allow herself to succumb to human needs of her own, as was clearly apparent to Clarke now.

"If having strength means that I have to give up my ability to love - my ability to feel *anything*, for that matter - then I *don't want it*. Let me be *weak*, for god's sake. There's so much more to life than being strong, Lexa."
She was gripping onto Lexa's jacket gathered at the small of her back now, as well, fingers still slowly massaging the brunette's scalp.

"But, you know what? I know that'll never be the case. I know that love will always be humanity's strength. You know why?"

Lexa shook her head a little against Clarke's shoulder.

Clarke's voice softened more than she'd ever allowed it to as she poured all of the gentle wonderment she could into her next words.

"It's because of you. You just confirmed to me that what you're doing is because of love - that your quest for peace is driven by love... No one will ever be able to convince me of otherwise now - no matter how hard they might try. And all of this just ultimately confirms to me what I've believed since I was a little girl - that love is our strength. Because you..."

Clarke swallowed against her overwhelming emotions as she allowed tears to run freely down her face and drip into Lexa's hair.

"You are the strongest person I've ever met."

She felt Lexa's chest hitch as the girl shook within her grasp. She felt the telltale signs of Lexa suppressing a sob that threatened to escape her lips, but she would never say anything about it to the other girl, either. In fact, she would never bring this moment up again if Lexa didn't want her to.

She knew she needed to let the girl have this moment.

To let Lexa hold her like she was now - hold her to the point where it felt like she almost couldn't breath, hold her so tightly that it felt as if they were nearly fused into one. To let her find solace in someone who wouldn't judge her, who just simply understood.

To let her be held be someone who truly cared.
Everything else could wait until morning, because all of it paled in comparison to what she was doing right now.

Nothing else had ever felt so important.

Nothing else had ever felt so right.
I am soooo sorry for that wait omg!!! I had midterms this past Monday and the previous week was just absolutely insane for me... I had to fight through a little bit of writer's block, as well, but I think I've found my rhythm again (and the direction of the story is still the same).

I had fun writing this one for multiple reasons, so hopefully it's as fun for you to read...(;

**NOTE: Just to clarify, white spaces in the text are to indicate either flash-forwards or flash-backs (really any passages of time that I'll elaborate on in the text) that I didn't deem worthy of fully "cutting" the story with the ---- marker. I also include spaces at the beginning and end to separate the body of the text from the website notes and stuff like that (; **

Thank you for being patient with me, and I hope you enjoy!! (: 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Clarke was pretty sure she hated riding horses.
She'd been riding one for nearly two hours now, and she **desperately** wanted to just get off and walk the rest of the way to Polis - no matter how much pain it caused her.

She'd prefer not to be sharing a saddle with Anya, either - but such was the nature of her current predicament.

Clarke and Lexa had stood in their impossibly tight embrace for what felt like hours after Clarke had finished her little speech.

Feeling a sudden wave of exhaustion and the overwhelming urge to get off of her feet overtaking her, Clarke had slowly untangled herself from the brunette and placed her hands on the girl's shoulders.

Lexa had averted her gaze from Clarke's for a moment, trying her best to stealthily wipe her eyes and work her features back into stoicism.

When she'd looked back into Clarke's eyes, though, the blonde saw something she'd never seen before - something she didn't think she was supposed to be privy to - reflected in the green pools before her. The emotion was much too powerful for her to even contemplate - let alone name - and Clarke suddenly felt as if it was indicative of something having changed between them. She couldn't say what it was - and she couldn't even begin to figure out how she knew that a change had even occurred, in the first place - but, for some reason, she just **knew**.

Feeling the weight of that change noticeably pressing down on her chest, she'd somewhat awkwardly cleared her throat and nodded politely to the other girl as she'd made to exit the tent.

Lexa had caught her wrist gently before she made it far, though, offering for Clarke to stay in her tent and rest for the night. She'd claimed it would be safer for Clarke there, as they were now facing an increasing number of threats from every direction to TonDC, but Clarke had simply brushed it off, telling Lexa that she needed to pack her things before their journey the next morning.

Despite the lame excuse, the brunette had reluctantly agreed, wishing Clarke a good night as she'd
watched the blonde exit her tent followed by one of the guards posted at the entrance. He fell into step behind Clarke automatically as he escorted her to her tent.

Clarke had felt Lexa's eyes burning into her back the entire time until she knew she was no longer visible to the other girl.

When Clarke had been awakened by Nyko just before sunrise the next morning, she knew she was going to have a long and tiring journey ahead of her.

The healer had helped her gather her things and wordlessly carried her treasures out to add them to the pile of belongings in a wagon waiting just outside her tent.

He'd brought her a change of clothes - a low-cut navy blue shirt and black shorts that showed off more of her body than she'd ever exposed in her entire life, she thought with a bit of chagrin - and told her to be ready, as they were going to be leaving within the hour.

When Clarke and Nyko had walked to the main entrance of TonDC, Nyko pulling the wagon full of supplies behind them, the blonde instantly realized that they were the last of the group to arrive.

Lexa was conversing with Indra, Gustus, Anya, and Lincoln just inside the gate, a horde of about 60 warriors milling about behind them.

Upon noticing their approach, though, the Commander's words had appeared to die in her throat as her eyes widened, mouth going slack at the sight of the blonde coming towards her. Green eyes raked unapologetically - and slowly - up and down her frame, taking in the sight of Clarke's more fully-exposed curves with something close to hunger in them.

Clarke blushed hotly under Lexa's intensely appreciative gaze. The brunette's ogling had been cut short by Anya stepping in front of her, though, addressing Clarke with barely-contained amusement in the wake of Lexa's momentary lapse in stoicism.

The other four warriors around them seemed to shuffle a little uncomfortably at what they'd just seen in Lexa's eyes - a sight they probably weren't supposed to have seen, Clarke thought.

Anyahad then briskly informed Clarke that they'd be riding together on the journey to Polis for the safety of everyone involved. Apparently, word had gotten out that the Sky Girl was typically kept
under the Commander's personal protection, so anyone who wished to capture her would invariably seek Lexa out first - which, in turn, would put the Commander in more danger than usual. That was something her generals couldn't have.

With that information, Anya had not-so-gently grabbed Clarke's left arm and pulled her past the group still huddled at the entrance without so much as a word.

Clarke had decided to forego the sling from here-on-out, so she used her newfound freedom to not-so-subtly brush Lexa's arm a little as she passed the rigid brunette.

She could feel Lexa's searing gaze glued to her back as Anya had pulled her along to the gathering of horses to the left of the group of warriors.

Clarke had been right in her initial assessment the previous night: something had definitely changed between her and Lexa.

So here she sat, sweaty back pressed to Anya's front as the large chestnut horse jostled her uncomfortably, ambling down the muddy path before them.

She and Anya were in the middle of the pack, surrounded by warriors on all sides. Few were on horseback, though; those few included Lexa and Gustus at the front of the group followed closely behind by Indra, who kept Lincoln (who she had apparently been assigned to watch) trudging along beside her. Nyko was the only other person on horseback, having been tasked with pulling the wagon of supplies.

To Clarke's overwhelming joy, Belou sat in front of the healer much like the blonde sat before Anya. He'd been granted permission to accompany them after Lincoln had made the case that he should be reunited with his sister in Polis.

Clarke often found herself watching the young boy take in their surroundings with an awe-filled expression, and she felt that it gave her more satisfaction than taking in the sights on her own ever would have.
In contrast to his joy, though, Anya seemed far less content, having not said a word since they’d left TonDC.

In fact, none of the warriors around them spoke as they walked. There seemed to be a great deal of tension in the air as they went, and Clarke suspected that their silence was purposeful - to make sure they weren't caught off-guard by any lingering enemies, probably.

She also supposed it had something to do with the fact that the Commander was currently dragging a seething Prince Roan behind her by a short rope, a cloth gag situated tightly between his teeth.

He stumbled along begrudgingly the whole way, nearly falling multiple times as Lexa remained unmoved by his struggles.

The prince walked to the left of Indra's horse, and Clarke watched the warrior occasionally kick him in the back of the head "by accident" every now and again. Clarke always had to suppress a chuckle at the expression on Roan's face when he turned around to glare at the seemingly-oblivious warrior.

It was due to his presence and the added threat it warranted that Clarke suspected the ranks were so uncomfortably quiet, and the blonde was itching with the need to loosen the tension somehow.

After a moment, she decided she would have to tread carefully with the stiff warrior situated behind her if she was going to get anywhere.

"So..." she began, voice tinged in awkwardness as she tried to keep it light. "When do we get to get off these things?"

Nyko turned around to smirk at her as his horse pulled the wagon of supplies up ahead of her to the right. Belou smiled happily at the sound of his skai prisa's voice, as well.

She couldn't see Anya's expression but she all but felt the powerful eye-roll directed at the back of her head.

"We stop when the Commander deems it necessary," the warrior answered flatly, tone cool. "Unless you'd like me to remove you from this horse so that you can walk from here."
Anya leaned in a little closer to Clarke to whisper menacingly into the blonde's ear - though she thought she heard traces of a smile in the warrior's voice.

"My orders are to keep you in this saddle until otherwise instructed, but I've been known not to listen to Lexa from time-to-time. *This* could be one of those times if you test my patience, Sky Girl."

Clarke simply snickered at the threat, turning around to meet Anya's dismayed gaze.

"See, that's something you and I seem to have in common, as of late - disobeying the Commander, that is," Clarke quipped, quirking a mischievous eyebrow at the warrior who simply rolled her eyes and scoffed in response.

Nyko chuckled quietly beside them while Belou smiled broadly despite not being able to understand a word of what had just been said.

After a few more minutes of tense silence, Clarke's ears quirked up at the sound of rushing water somewhere off to her left.

She turned her head and scanned the trees but couldn't seem to find the source as they continued forward.

She suddenly had an idea.

"Anya, stop the horse," she told the other girl holding lazily onto the reigns in front of her.

When Anya didn't respond, Clarke made to swing her injured leg over the horse before the warrior grabbed her right hand in one of hers.

"What do you think you're doing, *skai gada,*" she hissed threateningly at Clarke. The blonde refused to cower before the other girl.

"I don't know about you, Anya, but I'm getting absolutely *fried* in this saddle right now. I can hear water somewhere, and I could *seriously* go for a swim," she turned to Anya and steeled herself against the glare she was receiving.
"What do you say? We don't have to stop the whole group - we can get in and get out before anyone notices...please?"

She poured every ounce of innocence into the request as she all-but-pouted her lip at the other girl.

Anya clenched her jaw for a moment as she considered the blonde's request, glare only intensifying as she did so.

After a moment, though, she leaned down to address one of the warriors walking behind them. He cowered under Anya's intense gaze.

"When you see us disappear into the trees to our left, count to 500 in your head before you go and tell Heda that the skai gada and I have gone to get some water from the river. We will rejoin you on the path shortly."

Seemingly befuddled by her strange request, the warrior simply nodded after a moment as Anya stealthily directed the horse to the left. They made their way silently into the forest as Clarke glanced back to see Nyko, Belou, and the warrior watching them curiously as they galloped away.

Clarke waved to them with a smug grin plastered to her face as she and Anya made their way to the river.

When they came upon the rushing body of water after a short while, Anya wordlessly guided the horse along the shoreline until they came to an area where the water slowed.

To their left and down a rocky incline was a small waterfall that fell into a crystal-clear pool that fed the source of the river.

Anya stopped the horse near the tree line to their left and tied the reigns around one of the trunks before abruptly yanking Clarke off the saddle without warning.

The blonde huffed and regained her footing as she watched Anya make her way to the rocky shoreline.

She followed after a moment and walked up to the edge of the rocks that led to a drop-off into the clear little pool. If she were to follow the rocks up and around in a circle, she would be able to meet
"I didn't think you'd actually take me here," Clarke mused after a moment, turning to Anya who stood calmly eYeing the water to her right.

The warrior shot her a side-long glare.

"I couldn't care less about your stupid whims, skai gada," Anya responded coolly, crossing her arms before her. "I was simply getting tired of your sweat sticking to me everywhere. You smell like a dead animal cooking in the sun - are you aware of that?"

Clarke threw back her head and guffawed at that. Anya glared even harder at the blonde's laughter.

"Fair enough... But, if I'm being honest here, I don't actually know how to swim - which was why I wanted to come here in the first place," Clarke admitted after she'd managed to calm herself down. She smiled at Anya as she continued.

"There aren't very many large bodies of water in space, ya know."

Her smiled faltered as Anya suddenly turned to her with a wicked grin of her own now plastered to her features. Clarke took a hesitant step back, narrowing her eyes at the warrior's expression.

"It's not complicated, really," Anya stated matter-of-factly, raising an eyebrow in that same wicked expression. She crept towards Clarke now as the blonde continued to back up.

"Just flap your arms and kick your legs if you start to sink. I'm sure you'll figure it out..."

Without warning, Anya suddenly shoved Clarke back and sent her hurtling over the edge toward the water. The blonde yelped in surprise as she was sent flying, quickly immersed in the freezing liquid.

She nearly went into shock as the cold bit into her like a thousand tiny knives. Her body didn't seem to know what to make of the sudden temperature change - from blazing hot to chilling cold - and she was sure it couldn't be good to undergo such a sudden change so quickly.
As she sunk further into the water, she took note of the gorgeous kelp and colorful quartz that surrounded her in every direction beneath the surface. With a startling revelation, she realized how similar the sensation of floating in water was to being locked in the zero-gravity zones on the Ark. The weightlessness of her body immersed in this state of matter was instantly familiar, and she found a strange comfort in this re-discovered sensation.

If it weren't for the lack of oxygen, Clarke was sure she'd be content to continue sinking below the surface for hours.

As it were, though, she was jolted back to conscious thought by the reality of her burning - and now-empty - lungs. A burst of panic shot through her as she realized she had no idea how to get back to the surface.

Anya had said something about kicking her legs...

She jerked her neck up and noticed Anya watching her from what seemed like exceptionally high up on the edge of the rocks with her hands on her hips. She couldn't see the warrior's expression through the ripples, but she knew it'd probably be something close to impatient - not at all concerned by the fact that she could've potentially sent Clarke to her death with that little stunt.

With a renewed sense of purpose, Clarke frantically kicked her legs and moved her arms through the water, pleased at how the density of the substance beneath the surface seemed to ease the pain of her injuries and allowed her to move more freely than on land. She was beginning to see black spots around her vision when she finally broke the surface of the water with a desperate gasp.

She continued her frantic paddling and tried as best she could to keep her head above water so that her lungs could fill up with much-needed oxygen.

Anya clapped above her.

"Well done, skai gada," she shouted down to the struggling blonde, an amused quirk to her brow. "I knew you couldn't be as hopeless as you seemed."

Clarke managed to glare up at her as she continued to barely keep her head above the water. Anya seemed to take a semblance of pity on her as she smirked down at the girl.
"Try getting onto your back," she suggested, hands still on her hips. "You'll be able to float much easier that way."

Clarke did as she said and worked her body around so that she was flat on her back with her arms extended out beside her. She found that she barely needed to move in any way as she allowed the water to lap up over her limbs and around her temples.

The sensation of weightlessness was much more relaxing in this position, and she closed her eyes to the blinding sun as Anya snorted at the blonde's undeniably goofy grin now splitting her features.

Clarke let her body be gently pushed and pulled in the calm ripples of the cove's water. She would probably have allowed herself to drift off into a rather peaceful sleep had it not been for the fact that she'd probably drown if she did so.

Much too soon, Clarke heard the muffled sounds of horse hooves and voices through the lapping waves hitting her ears. Anya cursed to herself, and Clarke immediately knew what was coming.

She didn't open her eyes as a new voice spoke.

"And what, might I ask, is going on here?" Lexa's perturbed voice sounded from somewhere above Clarke. The blonde figured she was probably beside Anya on the edge of the small cliff.

"I'm conducting swimming lessons, Heda," Anya answered steadily, though a smile was evident in her voice.

Clarke snorted.

"More like - she shoved me into the water and told me to 'figure it out,'" Clarke quipped, eyes still closed. Anya chuckled lightly.

"Like I said, Leksa. Lessons," Anya responded merrily. Clarke would've rolled her eyes at the warrior had they not been closed.
"Did you stop all of the warriors on our behalf?" Anya asked after a moment, sounding somewhat hesitant now. "Because we were going to be joining you again shortly. We both just needed a little break and - wait, what are you doing?"

Before Clarke could open her eyes to figure out what was happening, a large splash in the water a few feet from where she floated sent her sputtering a little. Her eyes snapped open and she turned her head to the side to see an angry-looking Anya emerging from beneath the surface after a moment.

The warrior slicked her hair away from her face, wiping at her smudged war paint as she glared up at a thoroughly-smug Lexa standing on the edge of the rocks. The Commander smirked down at Anya with barely-contained amusement.

She crouched down on the rocks with her arms flopped lazily over her knees as she raised an eyebrow at the pair in the water below her.

"Lesson number one: never take your eye off your enemy - not even for a second, Onya," Lexa told the warrior flatly, barely managing to school her grin beneath her mask.

Clarke laughed happily as Anya growled at her Commander.

"I'll keep that in mind next time, Heda," the warrior spat, narrowing her eyes a bit - though Clarke could see the amusement threatening to overtake her expression.

Clarke hummed in contentment as she closed her eyes again, kicking her feet a little bit to keep afloat.

Not two seconds later, though, a happy shriek had her eyelids fluttering open as she watched Belou barrel over the side of the cliff past a stunned Lexa - straight towards Clarke, as a matter of fact.

With a gasp, the blonde barely managed to avoid the boy's trajectory as he crashed into the water feet-first. She heard Anya curse in Trigedasleng as waves were sent every which way in his wake, splattering both girls with excessive force.

When Belou re-emerged on the surface, his smile was the most innocently goofy thing Clarke had ever seen, and it sent the blonde into hysterics. Her laughter echoed off of every surface of the cove and rang out the loudest amongst sounds of warriors moving about and horses whinnying.
She closed her eyes as the happy sound surrounded her in a bubble, and she found that she was more than happy to allow herself to be consumed in such a way.

After what felt like forever in a few moments, Clarke opened her eyes and immediately locked onto the sight of the Commander staring down at her from the cliff’s edge.

Lexa looked positively enraptured. Her eyes danced softly beneath her war paint, her mouth slightly agape in an expression of pure wonderment as she gazed upon the blonde.

Clarke felt her cheeks heat as her lips quirked up into a soft smile in return. She felt her own eyes fill with a similar emotion as she stared back at the girl.

The prospect of Lexa being so fascinated and awe-struck because of *her* - for any reason, whatsoever - made Clarke's stomach flip and her heart flutter unreasonably in her chest. She'd never felt anything like it before.

How interesting this new change between them was.

Anya snorted somewhere off to her right, bringing Clarke back to reality.

"Perhaps you are hopeless in a different way, then," Anya mused quietly, just loud enough for Clarke to hear.

The blonde furrowed her brows at that, blushing even more furiously than before.

She'd have to be more careful about her occasional not-so-subtle ogling of the Commander. She didn't need to give Anya another reason to torment her, that's for sure.

Shaking her head a little, Clarke decided that now was the perfect time for her to get out of the water. She turned over onto her stomach and began to paddle towards the brook that separated the cove from where it spilled into the riverbed. She made her way over the little divide and continued to swim along the river until she came to a flatter shoreline.

She tried not to notice Lexa walking along the shoreline in her right periphery, keeping pace with her the entire time.
After a few moments, Clarke finally reached a more shallow area and slowly made to get out of the water. The effect of gravity taking hold of her limbs again made the ordeal a lot more difficult than it should've been.

She was beginning to feel like she'd have to drag herself out of the water on her hands and knees when she heard the sound of footsteps splashing through the water to her right. She looked up to see Lexa coming towards her in the shallow water. The Commander stopped before her and held out her hand, not saying a word.

"Lexa, no," Clarke protested quietly, noticing that Nyko was now approaching to stand behind his Commander at the shore line. "You're hurt, too. I've got this..."

Clarke cringed at how unconvincing her voice sounded.

Without warning, she suddenly felt herself being lifted by two hands supporting both of her elbows. In record time, Clarke was standing on her feet in the water staring blankly at Lexa - who completely took her by surprise with her movements.

The Commander was calm as ever as she regarded the blonde, hands still encircling Clarke's arms. Their eyes were locked in a strangely intense staring contest until Nyko cleared his throat behind Lexa. The Commander immediately released Clarke's arms and clasped her own behind her back, raising her chin a little.

"Heda, the towels are packed away, but if you'd like me to get one for her -"

"No, Nyko, it's fine," Clarke spoke up instead, glancing around the brunette in front of her. "I'd rather air dry in this heat, anyways."

She looked back to Lexa who appeared almost too impassive all of a sudden - like she was trying desperately to keep herself stoic, for some reason, having to clench her jaw with the effort. Almost as if she was doing everything she could to keep her eyes glued to Clarke's face...

Oh.
Clarke glanced down at herself and widened her eyes a little bit.

The clothes that were already much too tight before now clung to her body like another layer of skin, leaving very little to the imagination. Her breasts looked like they were just about ready to spring free from their bindings and spill out of the short-sleeved top - which was a bunched up a bit around her waist, revealing some of the bare skin at her hips.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so...exposed, so to speak.

Even though Lexa was the Commander of 12 Clans and a ruthlessly seasoned warrior, Clarke had to remind herself that she was still just a young woman. - a woman who apparently appreciated Clarke's figure, as it just so happened.

Clarke could definitely work with this going forward. Her thoughts turned a bit smug at the endless prospects.

She trained her eyes on her feet beneath the water and pressed her lips together in the attempts to fight the smirk threatening to show itself on her features.

Side-stepping the still-stiff Commander in front of her, Clarke made her way out of the water towards Nyko. After a brief moment, she heard Lexa following quietly behind her - and that's when she was struck with a little idea.

When she got to the left of Nyko, she stopped suddenly and bent down at the waist, flipping her hair over so that she could gather it up and pull it into a messy bun with the hair tie on her wrist. She purposefully lingered with her backside up in the air for a moment, smiling deviously to herself at the thought of Lexa's reaction to her current view.

Having spent much too long "gathering her hair," Clarke finally straightened back up, rolling her body with a little gratuitous sensuality as she did so.

She glanced at Nyko to her right, and the healer appeared ever-oblivious to her shenanigans.

When she spun on her heels to look at Lexa, though, she realized very quickly that the other girl was far from oblivious.

The Commander's cheeks were noticeably flushed beneath her warpaint, her mouth a bit slack as her eyes bored into Clarke's. Though it was obvious that the girl was working to secure her stoic mask
back into place, her eyes betrayed a much too heated emotion burning behind them - a type of desire that made Clarke's stomach lurch in a very pleasurable way. That same hunger she'd seen in those emeralds earlier on was magnified tenfold at the moment, and the blonde almost couldn't bear to meet the famished gaze upon her figure now.

Clarke wasn't sure what to make of this new way that Lexa was looking at her, despite how much fun it was to bring it about. It stirred things inside of her that shouldn't be allowed to come to the surface - would be exceptionally distracting if she allowed them to do so.

It caused her soul to blaze about in ways that couldn't be healthy; surely, it would burn up her entire core if given the chance to truly set alight.

Lexa stepped towards her with a freshly-schooled expression, immediately pulling Clarke out of her revery.

The Commander cleared her throat, swallowing thickly against whatever she couldn't allow herself to show anymore.

"We will ride straight on from here," Lexa informed the blonde, voice low and gravelly. "Due to the nature of the prisoner currently traveling in our ranks, we cannot afford to make camp along the way - too many vulnerabilities would be exposed if we did so."

Clarke nodded, considering the girl's words as she pursed her lips.

She watched as Anya and Belou made their way out of the water now, as well. Belou bounded straight for Nyko and wrapped himself around the healer's legs while Anya continued toward the tree line. Clarke followed the warrior in her left periphery as she made her way over to where Indra and Lincoln had a gagged Roan tied to one of the larger trees at the edge of the forest. Several other warriors were gathered around the prince, standing at the ready and directing their eyes every which way as if in search of potential danger.

Clarke could see now that Lexa was right about it being safer for them to just travel on through. It seemed that every single person in their group was on-edge, and the tension was beginning to eat its way into Clarke's psyche once again, moment of levity in the water now-forgotten.

Something suddenly stuck out to her in the Commander's words, though.

"Wait, 'prisoner?' Don't you mean, 'prisoners,' plural?" Clarke inquired quietly, genuine curiosity
coloring her tone. Nyko seemed interested in the answer, as well.

"I thought I was a prisoner, too. Your prisoner, as a matter of fact."

Lexa raised her chin nearly imperceptibly at that, eyeing Clarke carefully beneath her calm mask.

"I...no longer consider you a prisoner, Clarke," the Commander responded slowly, tone just as careful as her gaze. "You will be treated as more of a...guest in Polis, if you will. Maybe a sort of ambassador between your people and mine should it ever come to any form of negotiation. We will be discussing the nature of your mission much more intensely in the coming days. There is much to talk about... I hope that is alright with you."

The brunette's brows furrowed a little as she looked suddenly unsure of her intentions. Clarke simply smiled at the girl in response.

"Le-Commander, that's more than I ever could've asked for," she stuttered earnestly, a bit more animated as she spoke now. "Of course I'm alright with it! I, uh, I'm grateful for the...opportunity."

She cursed her graceless speech.

Where was the girl who'd given such a reassuring monologue to the same girl before her only the night before? Where was the girl who could come up with a snappy response to nearly any snide comment sent her way?

Where was the girl who was so determined to accomplish her dire mission and maintain an academic level of focus the entire time?

Perhaps this change between the Commander and herself would prove to be a bit more...challenging than she'd originally thought it to be. She needed to figure out a way to separate whatever strange feelings and impulses she was having for Lexa - who she could never completely discern much from - from her growing list of responsibilities to her people. Only then would she be able to give her mission the full attention it deserved.

How she would be able to do so when she had to work so closely with the very person threatening to undo the delicate facade of her current being simply by existing, Clarke had absolutely no clue.
She supposed she'd just have to figure it out one step at a time.

Polis was unlike anything she'd ever seen.

She and Anya were stopped in the middle of the caravan currently being processed through the front gates of the city.

Lexa and Nyko led the pack with Indra, Lincoln, and Roan trailing not far behind. They had disappeared inside the city walls moments before, and Clarke couldn't help but stare at the landscape around her.

They'd arrived in the glorious morning sunlight, having ridden swiftly through the night, and everything around them was bathed in warmth and color. The most noticeable landmark was the giant tower that shot up into the sky in the center of Polis a good distance from where they were entering. On either side of the road inside the entrance were small buildings and homes that resembled the sort of Roman-inspired architecture Clarke had read about in history books as a kid - the kind of architecture that was incredibly common across various regions of what used to be known as the United States of America before the bombings.

As Clarke and Anya finally made their way into the gate, she looked around at the trees surrounding the outside of the entrance one last time and silently promised herself that she would explore more of the perimeter of Polis eventually. She'd only seen hints of the landscape beyond the capitol's walls from the large hill they'd had to descend to get there - what looked like snow-capped mountains forming a sort of barrier off in the distance with a single body of water and endless forests filling the scenery up against the boundaries of the city in every direction.

Polis, itself, was massive - with a plethora of houses, make-shift huts, trading posts and larger marketplaces surrounding the tower in the center of everything. If the Ark in its entirety crashed
down right on top of the city, in fact, Clarke figured it would only destroy a mere quarter of the circumference of the city. Population-wise, she estimated the capitol, alone, probably held about four times as many people as the Ark did - something she hoped her people would take into consideration when thinking about how to approach the dealings with the Grounders.

The only sane option for her people would be to negotiate peace with these masses. None of the Arkers could afford to get on the Grounder's bad side - regardless of how many weapons they had, they were still grossly outnumbered.

All the more reason for Clarke, personally, to stay in the Commander's good graces. That's what she was telling herself, anyways.

She'd never seen such a vibrant place before: everything from the clothes of the various citizens gathered around to greet their Commander and a small portion of her army to the chorus of sounds that filled the air with the sweetest of music had Clarke nearly tearing up. Never in her wildest dreams could she have imagined that she'd be engulfed in such livelihood.

Everything about her current surroundings screamed of a vitality that she knew she'd never have had the privilege of experiencing on the Ark.

The prospect of exploration caused Clarke's heart to thud with excitement, a brilliant grin now splitting her features.

She and Anya hadn't made it five feet inside the walls, though, before the warrior suddenly veered the horse off to the right and took off at a jostling trot.

Clarke's face fell immediately.

"Wait, where are we going, Anya?" Clarke shouted to the warrior behind her over the sounds of the horse's hooves clomping on the cobblestone.

The background noise of the city began to quiet as the two made their way along the inner perimeter of the wall. Various buildings, alleyways, and small gardens blurred by them to the left as they galloped along, picking up speed the further they went.

Clarke was utterly confused.
"My orders are to escort you to the back entrance of the tower," Anya finally responded from behind her, voice flat. "It would not be safe to parade you down the central avenue of the city - especially with the amount of rumors circling around about your existence."

The warrior tightened her hold of the reigns around Clarke's body almost imperceptibly as they continued on.

"I am of the mind that it would be wiser not to escort the prince that way, either, but I believe our Commander wants to make something of a show out of him..."

Anya's voice sounded borderline disapproving as she spoke, but Clarke figured it was probably due to her worry for Lexa that such a reaction was spurned. The warrior knew how risky this display of power on the Commander's part would be - capturing the prince of one of the supposedly-allied clans within the Coalition only to publicly humiliate him before god-knows what type of punishment - but the risk of allowing the Ice Nation to continue their violent insolence without repercussion was far greater, at this point.

Since she'd been introduced to the stoic Commander, Clarke had learned more and more about how complicated and brutal Grounder politics were with every passing hour. At this point, she could only hope that her people would be able to abstain from becoming yet another problem on the Commander's list to be solved once she contacted them.

After a few minutes of hastened riding along the inside of the large wall, Anya abruptly veered the horse to the left and guided the creature through a shadowy alleyway leading into what appeared to be an empty marketplace. Clarke figured the majority of the city's occupants were greeting their Commander at the gate, but she was still surprised by just how empty the open area was. With the exception of a couple of people milling about in their booths, the place looked like a near-ghost town to the blonde.

Straight ahead of them now was the tower that had been looming over the two women the entire time. Up as close as they were, Clarke nearly gulped at just how massive the structure was. She figured it to be at least 60 stories tall by old measurements - maybe more.

Anya pulled the horse to a stop near a small door on the south side of the tower, hopping off and tying the reigns to a stable wooden post with ease. Without preamble, she yanked Clarke down from the saddle and pulled the blonde along behind her by her good arm. Clarke winced as her bad leg was forced to quickly adjust to the sudden motion of walking again.

She absently wondered if Anya understood the concept of gentleness at all.
They climbed a couple of stone steps to a small door guarded by two intimidating men with blank faces, and Anya nodded her greeting to them in passing. She pulled Clarke swiftly through the door and into a dark corridor that the blonde could barely make out due to the lack of light within it. The warrior guided her to the right and they were suddenly in a much wider hallway lit by torches every few feet.

Clarke's jaw dropped open at the sight of what looked to be some sort of elevator at the end of the otherwise-empty hallway. She'd only ever seen such a contraption in films before, and the prospect of riding in one caused her stomach to churn nervously a little bit.

Two guards waited by some sort of wagon wheel off to the side while another pair stood at the entrance of the metal crate, waiting. Anya walked right past them into the elevator with Clarke on her heels and addressed them curtly in Trigedasleng. The guards simply nodded, maintaining their stance outside of the doors while signaling to the other two men at the wheel.

With a metallic screech and an echoey thud, Clarke watched as the doors closed in front of them and felt the elevator slowly begin to ascend. Her blood rushed in her ears and she couldn't help the tightness in her chest at the new sensation.

She glanced at Anya on her left who still had a hold of her arm and found a bit of comfort in the unmoved expression on the warrior's face. Clarke attempted to slow her breathing a bit as they continued further up the tower.

What felt like hours later, the elevator finally came to a stop with a small lurch and the doors where wrenched open to reveal a hallway shooting off to their left and right.

Anya immediately pulled Clarke out of the metallic box and hurried down the hall to the left. The wall that had been straight ahead of them as they'd exited the elevator was now to their right, and Clarke took note of the strange design along its length that allowed for morning sunlight to beam through and create intricate patterns on the adjacent wall and floor before them.

After a moment, they came upon a set of beautiful oak doors on the left and Anya pushed them open without a word and guided the blonde inside.

The room was massive: a four-poster bed adorned with thick furs stood a few feet ahead of them with elaborately-decorated bookshelves running along the walls to their left and right - similar to the patterns in the hallway. Two single-seater sofas with a small table between them were situated off to the left near a massive open window that made up the entire wall to the outside of the tower.

Clarke could make out every immaculate detail of the clear blue sky from her heightened vantage point, and she smiled at the prospect of being so close to the clouds once again.
"The Commander's maidservants will provide you with food and drink if you so desire it, but you are not to leave this room until further instructed. Is that clear, skai gada?" Anya asked, tone cool and unquestioning.

Clarke simply nodded, refusing to tear her eyes away from the large window she so desired to look through.

After a lingering moment, she felt Anya release her arm and heard the warrior make her way out of the room, closing the doors behind her with a loud thud. She thought she heard the sound of a lock clicking into place on the outside of the doors, but she was unperturbed by the noise either way.

Almost as if in a trance, Clarke made her way over to the window and placed both hands on its base to lean out a little into the summer air.

She nearly burst into tears at the beauty before her eyes.

Just as she'd seen from the top of the hill leading down into Polis, the city appeared nearly endless as it stretched out into the green valley surrounded by majestically snow-peaked mountains to the north and east. Beyond the boundaries of the city was a stretch of blooming canopy that was only ever interrupted by a large lake near the base of the mountains off to the right. She nearly felt like she could reach up and run her fingers through the mist of the clouds from how high up she was.

Below her and surrounding the tower in every direction she could see was the capitol in all of its fascinating glory. The architecture was consistent with what she'd seen upon entering the gates, and she felt as if she'd suddenly been transported back in time - back to a time when the Earth was filled with brilliant structures and marvelous creations of mankind that added to the landscape as opposed to detracting from it, back when every corner of the planet was teeming with humanity and its culture.

Back to a time when life was something to be lived, not just endured.

Clarke felt tears streaming down her face and silently refused to wipe them away.

They were proof that it was possible to experience such overwhelming happiness that your body simply couldn't contain it, and she would never dare to erase that.
Some time later, Clarke found herself seated on the stony windowsill, legs swinging a little against the outside of the tower as both hands supported her on either side.

She was glad that her hair was up in a bun, having braved a multitude of wind gusts since she'd taken to her new perch. Nothing could prevent her from feeling anything but contentment, though, as she nearly hummed with pleasure at her current predicament.

The afternoon sun was high in the sky now, and she knew she'd probably missed any opportunity to have lunch - but she truly couldn't be bothered. Not even her growling stomach could interrupt her from the near-meditative state she'd achieved up on the windowsill.

She'd watched as the marketplace had gradually filled back up at the base of the tower, and she took pleasure in watching the ant-sized bodies bustling about as they got back to their usual routine. She hadn't been able to make out whether or not the Commander had reached the tower, but she figured the rest of the caravan of warriors had dispersed to go about their days as they pleased at this point.

The sounds of the wind whipping about around her blocked everything else out, and Clarke was a little disappointed that she couldn't hear the soundtrack of the hustle in the busy marketplace, but she supposed that would just have to wait until later.

Had it not been for the loud wind whistling in her ears, Clarke might've been able to hear the sounds of the doors to her room opening and closing behind her. As it were, though, she was unable to detect the figure suddenly rushing up to where she sat.

That is, until she felt two hands on her waist suddenly yanking her down from her perch and placing her back onto her feet - albeit, gently.

She was spun around by those same hands now braced on her shoulders, and she was greeted by the sight of a very disturbed Lexa merely a foot from her. Green eyes probed her face as the girl's expression remained somewhat aghast.

"What on earth were you doing up there, Clarke?!!" the brunette prompted, tone incredulous and
slightly more than worried. "You could have easily lost your balance and - "

"Relax, Lexa," Clarke cut her off calmly, brushing off the other girl's concern. "I've been up there for hours. The view was fantastic."

The Commander looked exceptionally displeased at this information, mouth slightly agape.

"How reassuring, Clarke. Truly," Lexa spoke sarcastically, rolling her eyes as she moved her left hand to pinch the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger, shutting her eyes as she did so.

Clarke chuckled at the girl's suddenly exasperated expression.

"I think I'm pretty good with heights, Commander," Clarke whispered almost conspiringly to the brunette.

Lexa sighed heavily and opened her eyes at that, moving both hands to clasp behind her back as she appraised the blonde with careful stoicism once more.

"If you say so, Clarke," she conceded finally, raising an eyebrow in her otherwise-calm expression.

The blonde pursed her lips for a moment before turning on her heels and moving to flop down gracelessly into one of the leather one-seaters. Lexa remained by the window but followed Clarke with her eyes the entire way, turning her body to better face the blonde once she was seated.

"So..." Clarke spoke after a moment, tapping the fingers of her left hand on the arm of the chair. "What now?"

Lexa continued to watch her calmly, carefully considering her words before she spoke.

"I would like you to get acquainted with Polis, Clarke," the Commander informed her after a moment, voice firm as she spoke. "Nyko tells me that you are well-versed in the ways of a healer, and I believe it would benefit you to take up an apprenticeship under his instruction - if that is alright with you, of course."
Clarke blinked, beyond stunned for a moment before she finally nodded a little, urging Lexa to continue.

The brunette nodded once in return before she spoke again.

"I have many things to oversee in the coming days before I can even entertain the thought of communicating with your people, but rest-assured that the radio remains safely under my protection, and I do not intend to ignore it for much longer. You and I have much to discuss in regards to your mission, but I trust that we will be able to address every possible obstacle when the time comes."

Lexa took a couple of steps towards where Clarke was seated and looked down at the blonde through her warpaint, face ever the stoic mask.

"For now, though, I'd like you to experience what our culture truly has to offer anyone who takes the time to learn about it... In fact, I believe the capitol will give you a much more accurate perception of who we are as a people - if you give it the chance to do so, of course."

The Commander closed the distance between them until she was standing right above Clarke now. She extended her left hand to the blonde with a small smile playing at her lips, eyes dancing with a hint of mirth now.

"What do you say, Clarke?" Lexa asked, voice ever-so-gentle as she looked down at the blonde with an expectant expression.

"Would you like to see Polis with me?"
hehehe I think it's safe to say that Commander Heart Eyes officially made her first appearance in this chapter... (;

Things are about to get a lil bumpy y'all, so brace yourselves....
Polis was exceptionally overwhelming.

Clarke stood in the center of the marketplace at the base of the tower and simply stared at the scene unfolding before her eyes.

Everywhere she looked, there were clumps of people moving hastily about their business and taking advantage of the bustling center of commerce. She peeked around the left side of the hood of her cloak to where Lexa stood silently at her side, hand resting casually on the hilt of her sword.

The Commander had provided her with a pair of long black pants and a dark cloak before they’d left
the tower, claiming that it would be much safer for Clarke if she remained as inconspicuous as possible. How she could do that when she was getting personally escorted around the capitol by the most recognizable person in all the lands - the very Commander, herself - Clarke didn't know, but she figured it was best not to question Lexa's logic when it came to this sort of thing.

She had reluctantly accepted the fact that she'd probably do just about anything the brunette asked her to anyways at this point - despite how much she enjoyed testing the Commander's authority. For some reason, it was as if she'd be willing to follow the other girl into the fiery pits of hell if she had to - and she knew it had been so since the moment she'd first lain eyes on her. The shift between them only seemed to amplify what was already there.

A heated argument caught her attention up ahead to the right.

Two men were confronting one another in abrasive Trigedasleng, and their rigid body language was almost comical to Clarke. One of them was forcing some type of fish in the other one's line of sight, refusing to put the floppy thing down until the man heard his complaints. The other - most likely the merchant - refused to do what his customer was asking and simply turned his back, storming away from his cart covered in dead fish of all sorts.

Clarke watched the merchant storm off with the customer on his heels, a broad grin on her face as she did so.

Before she could make a witty comment to Lexa about it, though, she caught sight of Nyko, Belou, and Zenya making their way towards the two girls in the center of the action. They stopped before two other figures blocking their path.

Ryder and Anya - who had taken it upon themselves to act as the Commander's guards during this excursion - nodded to the three friendly faces and allowed them to approach Lexa and her guest.

"Heda," Nyko inclined his head respectfully to Lexa, who returned the gesture in kind.

Clarke smiled sweetly at Belou who was holding onto his sister's hand and bouncing on the balls of his feet in excitement. Zenya - who wouldn't make eye contact with Clarke for some reason - was dressed in grey slacks and a loose long-sleeved tunic that complemented her dark skin beautifully. She appeared to have aged significantly since the last time Clarke had seen her - far too much considering the amount of time that had passed since their last encounter.

"The boy wished to see his skai prisa before he accompanied his sister to her lessons," Nyko informed the girls politely, a small smile playing at his features. He looked very much at home here.
"I hope that is alright."

Clarke saw Lexa nod curtly in her periphery.

Nyko said something to Belou in Trigedasleng and the boy immediately broke away from his sister and ran at Clarke like an overly-energized freight train, arms extended.

She grunted with the impact of his embrace, moving her arms so that she could cradle his head with her left hand as he locked her in a bear hug. His head came up to her chest, and she leaned down and rested her chin on the top of his frizzy curls and gripped him tightly around the shoulders with her right hand.

It felt strange to be wrapped in such a steady embrace while the rest of the world seemed to be blurring past them in every direction, but Clarke found immense comfort in the stillness of the moment.

She also just really, really liked hugs.

After another moment, Nyko cleared his throat and walked up to gently tug Belou away from Clarke - who chuckled softly when the healer very nearly had to peel the boy off of her.

He inclined his head to Clarke and Lexa once more before pulling Belou off to the left with Zenya on their heels.

Belou waved to Clarke until he was swallowed up in the hive of the city, and she found herself brimming with affection for the enthusiastic boy.

"He seems to have really taken to you," Lexa commented quietly, turning to Clarke a little as she spoke.

Anyà and Rider continued to stand a couple of feet in front of them, posture relaxed as they observed the goings-on in the marketplace.
"I...yeah, I guess he has," Clarke agreed somewhat awkwardly, smiling a little and shrugging her shoulders. "Maybe he just likes blondes."

She saw Lexa's lips twitch almost imperceptibly in her periphery, struggling to maintain her stoicism before she spoke.

"I don't blame him."

Clarke whipped around at that, nearly throwing the hood right off of her head as she gawked at the Commander. Lexa simply met her gaze with her usual mask in place, a slight quirk to her eyebrow as she took in the blonde's expression.

"Shall we walk?" the brunette asked after a moment, tone exceptionally casual.

Symbolically picking her jaw up off the ground, Clarke merely nodded a bit weakly and proceeded to make her way further into the city, Lexa right by her side.

It only took about an hour for Clarke to decide that Polis was the best place she'd ever had the privilege of visiting.

Everywhere she looked, she found something new to memorize and take in; whether it was a person, color, sound, or building, Clarke felt like she'd never been more welcoming of such a sensory overload in her entire life.

The emotions that the environment stirred within her hadn't been accessed since she was a child; more specifically, since the time her father used to hoist her up into the air with his arms extended all the way and spin her around until she couldn't breath from laughing so hard. Or when her mother would read her novels that had been written before the bombings and act out every character's voice in a unique - and often comical - way.
Clarke didn’t have the adequate words to describe this kind of happiness, so she found herself relying on her favorite memories and the feelings associated with them to do the trick instead.

What made the experience even more profoundly enjoyable in Clarke's mind was the fact that Lexa stayed by her side the entire time, watching with soft eyes as Clarke committed every detail of her city to memory one-by-one.

She'd occasionally speak up to offer descriptions of various buildings and booths Clarke would point out - both in English and Trigesdasleng - and the blonde stored each precious piece of information away as if it was the most important thing she'd ever learned. The Commander seemed to greatly appreciate Clarke's attentiveness, and her mirth grew exponentially with every excited utterance the blonde would make in response to her descriptions.

Anya and Ryder had cleared a path for them as they walked down the central avenue of the city, and the Grounders gave their Commander a respectfully wide berth for her and her guest to pass through.

The people seemed to only have eyes for Lexa, though, and Clarke now realized how insignificant her presence probably was to them at this point. They most likely passed her off as another random visitor to their capitol, as unimportant as the next who would seek out Lexa's company.

The contrast between Clarke's treatment and Roan's highlighted a calculated move by the Commander. By having dragged the prince down the entirety of the main street of the capitol, the Commander had purposefully made an example out of him, very publicly taking him as her prisoner for all to see. Clarke was sure that the news of such a bold move would spread like wildfire throughout the clans of the Coalition - hopefully reaching the ears of Queen Nia, as well - and the blonde had no doubt that such a result was exactly what Lexa wanted.

Roan was now locked away in some hidden dungeon, apparently, and Clarke couldn't help but shudder to think what kind of things might lay ahead for the man.

She still needed to figure out how the hell he'd managed to get a hold of her wristband, but she supposed that would have to wait for awhile - at least until after Lexa had her turn with him.

Something caught Clarke's eye within the entrance of a large white tent on the right side of the street, halting her train of thought, and she immediately made a beeline for the object.
Lexa and her guards were right on her heels as she stepped into the tent and approached the beaten-up contraption that stood out to her so.

An elderly woman remained oblivious to the newest additions to her shop, drifting in-and-out of consciousness in a small chair situated behind a table on the opposite side of the tent.

Clarke ran her right hand along the object that was sitting just inside the left flap of the tent, appraising its condition with something close to awe evident in her expression.

"What is it, Clarke?" Lexa inquired softly from beside her.

The girls were nearly brushing shoulders with the lack of space between them, and Clarke tried to ignore the heat rising on her skin at their proximity.

"I've only ever seen something like this in old movies, but..." the blonde trailed off, shaking her head a little in reverent disbelief. "If I'm right about this, I'm looking at a real life record player in the flesh - so to speak."

She turned her head to the left to meet Lexa's confused gaze, the brunette narrowing her eyes with a lack of comprehension as Clarke's danced excitedly.

"And what does this so-called 'record player' do?" the Commander asked almost hesitantly, eyeing the blonde carefully now.

Clarke simply smiled at her, signaling her to wait for a moment.

With newfound purpose, the blonde searched the area around the old wooden player for signs of records scattered in the clusters of random knick-knacks creating chaos all throughout the tent.

Crouching down with her hands on her knees, she shuffled through the various stacks beneath the table that the player was seated on and emerged victorious after a few moments, a couple of ancient-looking record sleeves in both hands.
She tucked the worn sleeves under her right armpit and turned to face Lexa, who looked even more confused than she had before - to the point where Clarke almost laughed at the girl's expression.

"It would be much easier if I could just show you what it does, actually," Clarke nearly whispered to the brunette currently gaping at her.

The Commander considered her words for a moment before nodding and looking over her left shoulder, signaling to Anya and Ryder waiting just outside the entrance.

She reached into a pouch on her waist and handed Anya something, instructing her to give whatever it was to the old woman, who seemed absolutely shocked to have woken up to so many people in her shop at the moment - one of them being her beloved Commander. Lexa then had Ryder collect the record player gingerly from the table.

Clarke watched the whole scene in silent bewilderment as Lexa turned to her once again, stoic as ever.

"The record player is yours now," she told the stunned blonde matter-of-factly.

Clarke's mouth dropped open dramatically at that, heart pounding a little unevenly in her chest as Lexa's eyes bored into hers.

"Show me."

The two girls stood in the middle of Clarke's room, facing each other while locked in a heat gaze. Lexa had that same look in her eyes that she'd had when Clarke had exited the water the day before, and the blonde really didn't know what to make of it now.

They'd made their way back to the tower in the warm evening sunlight, Clarke growing increasingly nervous at the prospect of what they were about to do.
Ryder had placed the record player on the wooden table in Clarke's room - as Lexa had insisted that it would be the blonde's to keep - and he and Anya had left the two alone as per the Commander's instructions.

Clarke had been unsure of whether or not the old player would even work at first, but she'd quickly been relieved to find out that, despite its age, the thing seemed to run on solar power as opposed to electricity. It also appeared to be at full charge from having been placed at the edge of the tent in the bright sunlight for who-knows-how-long.

Clarke had picked out the first record on the stack Lexa had bought her - a soundtrack by a woman named Ella Fitzgerald - and put the needle to the CD, pressing a button to make it spin.

Lexa's eyes had widened into saucers the moment the lively sounds of jazz began to spill from the player. She seemed utterly taken aback and exceptionally fascinated at the same time, her eyes darting back-and-forth quickly between Clarke and the player as the music sounded.

Clarke had simply smiled at the girl from where she stood directly across from her, extending her left hand out as the song began to build.

"May I have this dance?" Clarke husked suggestively to the brunette now grinning at her more sweetly than the blonde had ever seen before.

The sight caused her heart to flutter relentlessly in her chest.

Lexa's smile faltered a little as she swallowed thickly at Clarke's words, eyes suddenly flashing with the furthest thing from innocence.

Clarke cleared her throat a little.

"Sorry, I -" she sputtered, losing her momentary burst of confidence, "I also saw that in a movie once and...I've kind of always wanted to say it."

Lexa's smile returned ever-so-softly now, stepping towards Clarke and taking her outstretched hand with impossible gentleness in one of her own.
The blonde's skin was set aflame at the contact, and her entire body almost visibly jolted at the sensation. She secretly hoped Lexa had felt it, too - but the brunette's eyes gave nothing but a quiet contentment away now as she met the blonde's gaze.

"You have nothing to apologize for, Clarke. Just show me what to do." The Commander appeared to almost challenge the blonde with those words, quirking an expectant eyebrow in her otherwise stoic expression.

Clarke chewed her lower lip a little.

"Right, uh -" she began, closing the space between the two of them and moving her right hand to Lexa's waist without preamble.

Her heart thumped unevenly now, and she pleaded with whatever holy entity was listening that Lexa couldn't see the hot blush coloring her cheeks.

Lexa's eyes widened slightly at their new position, swallowing against whatever reaction she might have had as she continued to meet Clarke's gaze steadily.

"Now, the leader - me, in this case - guides the dance the whole time, so you've gotta promise to just trust me on this, okay?" Clarke's eyes searched Lexa's in the attempt to gauge her reaction.

She found a sudden intensity she hadn't seen before now reflecting back at her in the glorious emeralds.

"I do trust you, Clarke," Lexa told her quietly, voice thick with a heavy emotion that the blonde wouldn't dare place.

The words seemed too profound to simply be referring to the dance, but Clarke refused to allow herself to be taken out of the moment long enough to analyze them.

"Good," she replied simply after a moment, fighting to suppress some strange emotions of her own from taking hold of her.
"Move your right hand so that it sort of drapes over mine, then place your left hand on my right shoulder," Clarke instructed softly, voice nearly drowned out by the sultry jazz filling the air.

Lexa followed her instructions perfectly, and the movements brought them nearly chest-to-chest as the music continued to play.

Clarke gulped and attempted to calm her raging heartbeat as she met the gaze of the expectant brunette before her.

"Okay, when I step forward, you step back. When I step back, you come forward... Just mirror my steps the whole time, and you'll get the hang of it, I promise," the blonde almost whispered now.

Lexa simply nodded, swallowing once again as she appeared to be working to maintain her composure.

At the start of the next verse of the song, Clarke took an experimental step forward and Lexa immediately stepped back, moving as if by instinct. The blonde smiled encouragingly at the other girl as she stepped back again, and Lexa followed right along in stride.

After a couple more slow steps to the left and right, the pair fell into a smooth rhythm that matched the steady pace of the music now. Lexa allowed herself to be guided completely by Clarke, her body exceptionally pliant in the blonde's grasp.

Every move she made seemed more elegant than the one before, and Clarke found herself entranced by how easily Lexa succumbed to the motion of their dance. She glided across the floor while Clarke anchored them down, and the blonde couldn't help but notice how perfectly their movements seemed to complement one another.

They continued their graceful dance as the music lilting on in the background, and Clarke was vaguely aware of the sensation of time falling away from them where they moved together.

She felt the walls of the tower fall away as they drifted off into the vast expanse of stars above them, transported back to a memory of another time - a time before deadly bombings and bloody wars, before advanced technology and the constant whirring of lifeless machines that sought to replace the chorus of natural life.
A time when the only thing that could keep two people tethered to the earth was the eyes of the person in which their minds found solace, in which their bodies found comfort.

A time when true freedom meant being held by the person whose soul had cemented itself as your equal.

Beyond the nervousness that came from such proximity to Lexa's frame, Clarke found that there was also an overwhelming sense of peace to be felt in the other girl's presence. It was unlike anything she'd ever felt before, and she doubted that even the most effective of meditation techniques could've gotten her to this state of mind.

"Where did you learn how to dance, Clarke?" Lexa asked in a near-whisper, eyes dancing with unhidden affection as she gazed upon the blonde in her arms.

"My father," Clarke answered softly, a sad smile pulling at her lips. "When I was little, he would put me on his feet and spin us around the room until I almost threw up. He'd usually do it when I'd have a bad day... Somehow, he always knew when that was without me having to say a word."

She laughed shakily at her memories, tears brimming in her eyes now.

The sympathy in Lexa's gaze caused them to spill right over, leaving them streaming down her cheeks in haste.

Lexa immediately moved both of her hands to gently swipe the tears away with the pads of her thumbs, cupping Clarke's cheeks with exceptional tenderness after she did so.

Their faces were merely inches away now.

"Your father sounds like a wonderful man," Lexa whispered softly, her hands on either side of Clarke's face still.

She held the blonde with the care of one holding something extremely precious to them in the palm of their hands, desperate to shield it from every bad thing in the world.
"I'm sure he would be very proud of you."

Clarke's breath hitched as the tears continued to stream down her face. She felt the walls of the tower suddenly snap back around them, enclosing them in thick air that was nearly impossible to wade through.

The music had stopped long ago, the record having played all the way through to the back side.

The silence was much louder now than the music had ever been, though.

"Proud of what?" Clarke choked out, struggling against the tightening of her throat.

Her body was trembling a little bit, and she encircled Lexa's wrists in both of her hands where the girl still cupped her cheeks.

"Proud of the daughter who couldn't even finish the mission he died trying to complete? Who, essentially, got herself exiled for being the most expendable out of everyone else who'd been dumb enough to get themselves locked up?"

Clarke felt herself slipping very quickly into the self-loathing she was all-too-familiar with, and it left her nearly gasping for breath as it threatened to bury her.

Lexa laced the tips of her fingers into Clarke's hair as she brushed the blonde's cheeks with her thumbs once more - this time for comfort. Her grip was much firmer now as she stepped impossibly closer to the girl she held so tenderly.

"You are not expendable, do you hear me?" Lexa spoke passionately, quiet voice laced with as much intensity as her eyes now. "You have not failed in completing his mission, either. In fact, I would say that you've actually succeeded at this point... You're here now, and you're alive - which is a lot more than most of your people probably could've accomplished. You honor him by making it this far, Clarke."

Lexa's eyes searched Clarke's as the blonde gripped more tightly onto the girl's wrists.
"I know that you will succeed in anything you put your mind to, and you'll have my support every step of the way. Do you understand me?"

Clarke simply nodded after a moment, too overwhelmed to speak.

"As Commander, I told you that I cannot make false promises, or put the needs of one above the rest - and that will always remain true for as long as I live. My duty is to my people, and I will put their best interests first every single time - no matter what." Lexa swallowed, struggling against the warring emotions now evident on her features.

"But...as Lexa, I would do just about anything you asked me to at this point - even if you wanted me to support some of the worst decisions you could end up making. I would do that for you in a heartbeat. Because, Clarke... you're the furthest thing from expendable to me... You're - "

Lexa's words were cut off by the sound of Clarke's bedroom doors suddenly swinging open.

The two girls startled apart at the noise, quickly separating themselves and attempting to find reality once more.

Clarke turned to see Anya striding in with a look of displeasure apparent on her face.

"Heda, Titus wishes to speak with you about the prince," she informed her Commander briskly, sounding incredibly peeved. "He waits for you in the throne room."

Lexa nodded curtly after a moment, having composed her features completely beneath her stoic mask once more.

"Mochof, Onya. I will be there momentarily," she told her warrior calmly.

Anya nodded once and turned on her heels to exit the room without so much as a glance in Clarke's direction.

Lexa moved a couple of steps towards the door before hesitating, turning halfway around to face Clarke again. Her expression was the slightest bit softer as she looked upon the blonde.
"Rest now, Clarke," she instructed the girl quietly, face otherwise inscrutable despite its softness. "Your apprenticeship with Nyko begins tomorrow, and I suspect you will be very busy in the coming days."

Clarke nodded in understanding after a beat, smiling slightly at the brunette still gazing at her.

"Right, yeah, of course..." She hesitated a little, taking a slight step towards the Commander.

"Thanks for the dance, Leksa."

The other girl smiled gently at her now, mask falling away for the briefest of moments to reveal a vulnerable shyness playing at her features.

"Any time, Klark."

Clarke's first week in Polis was a blur.

It was almost unfathomable to her that she'd only been on the ground for a little over a month now.
She felt more at home amongst the people of Polis and immersed in their culture than she ever had on the Ark. Everything about the city and its inhabitants gave Clarke a sense of belonging and comfort that she had yet to feel except when encompassed in the arms of her parents - and not even the two of them could have filled her with so much calm and contentment at this point in her life, she thought.

Her apprenticeship under Nyko's guidance had reinvigorated her sense of purpose, overtaking her desire to deal with her people by a considerable margin.

They spent the first couple of days making house-calls around the capitol, attending to sickly patients in too poor a condition to make it to the city's main clinic within the tower. Clarke took note of the various techniques Nyko would use to assess the patients and made sure to memorize the details of every treatment he supplied the patients with.

Most of the remedies were homeopathic by nature, often simplified versions of the chemical antibiotics Clarke was familiar with back on the Ark. She quickly realized that the core ingredients of most medications that she was familiar with were derived from plants, and she committed the origins of every substance she came across to memory, storing them away to inevitably be made useful at another point in time.

Nyko seemed impressed by her affinity for picking up the information, and he began to treat her more as an assistant than an apprentice as the week went by, allowing her to take charge of many of the patients within the tower on her own.

Her presence became something of a topic of debate among the people of Polis. Nyko would tell her of the various rumors spreading around the city, often laughing at their inaccuracies and praising their creativity.

The blonde was something of an enigma to the Grounders in the capitol, it seemed. Though she appeared to be just like any other valued guest to the Commander, she knew she embraced her apprenticeship far more fervently than any other guest probably would have. She took her job very seriously, and the people apparently began to suspect that their Heda had personally seen to it that a freshly skilled and efficient healer was recruited to take up residence within their city.

It was the closest thing to the truth that Clarke was comfortable allowing to spread.

Anything about her being from the Sky would cause too much of a stir, anyways - just as it had done in TonDC.
Besides, she was content with having the title of *skai prisa* be a more private nickname for those who truly knew who she was - Nyko, Lincoln, and Belou being the only ones close to her who referred to her by such a name at this point.

She'd barely seen Lincoln over the course of the week, though, as the warrior had been kept busy with lengthy training sessions overseen by Indra, Anya, and Gustus, on occasion.

The three generals trained various factions of Lexa's army stationed in Polis during the day - including Clarke's favorite little group, the Nightbloods.

Though Titus - Lexa's imposing and unfriendly advisor who always seemed to be lurking in one dark alleyway or another and wouldn't so much as deign Clarke a glance - was the Nightbloods' principle instructor, the Commander's top generals often assisted in their fight training, which complimented Titus's more philosophical lessons (which Clarke already had major qualms about).

She'd first encountered the kids on her second day in Polis, trailing behind their Commander down the central avenue as Clarke had emerged from one of the tents near the marketplace.

Lexa had stopped the group upon seeing Clarke and made formal introductions between them. Clarke had been momentarily stunned by the age of the Nightbloods, and the realization that the successors to the Commander's throne were a bunch of *children* who'd have to fight to the death to secure the position made her feel like she was about to throw up.

Still, she'd maintained her composure until the group had passed her by, ducking into a nearby alleyway to release the contents of her stomach after they'd gone.

Every night, Clarke would bathe in the large stone tub adjacent to her bedroom, peeling off her tunic and pants with relief as she allowed her body to be cleansed of the day's grime.

The Commander's maidservants would replace her clothes with a clean set almost immediately, doing all they could to assist the blonde who otherwise refused their help. Her injuries were healing at a gradual and healthy pace, and she appreciated the freedom that her increased mobility offered her - and she didn't intend to waste it in any way.

Afterward, she would make her way down a couple flights of stairs to a large dining room off one of the main hallways.

She'd usually only be seated for a couple of minutes before Lexa would make her way into the room and sit silently at the chair opposite her on the other end of the long wooden table. The pair would
eat in a comfortable silence before moving their plates aside and recounting the inconsequential
details of their days to each other.

Due to the sensitive nature of Lexa's current dealings, she would often redirect the conversation to
asking about any and every detail she could glean about Clarke's life. The blonde didn't mind,
though - she wanted Lexa to learn everything there was to know about her, for some reason.

Until the opportunity arose that she could ask more about Lexa's personal life, though, she would
simply have to be content with the little bits and pieces she would occasionally receive: details like
the fact that Anya had practically raised the girl (despite being relatively close to the brunette in age)
up until her Conclave since she'd been orphaned at the age of four. Or the fact that the Commander
had always been fascinated by astronomy, and the girl often tried to get away from the lights of the
city to study the constellations whenever she had a spare moment - which wasn't very often,
apparently.

Clarke liked this version of Lexa - the one who seemed noticeably more relaxed to be back within
her home, the one who hadn't sported war paint since the day they'd arrived in Polis. She felt a little
bit more human than the Lexa that Clarke was used to, and the blonde found her affections growing
tenfold with every second she spent with the other girl.

She continued to swallow her feelings, though, knowing that they probably wouldn't bode well for
either one of them right now - and still a bit unsure how Lexa would react to such an advance.

(Although, in the back of her mind, Clarke truly knew that the girl who was so gentle and respectful
with her, who asked for a dance whenever she had a spare moment of time instead of slipping away
to memorize constellations as she used to, and who ultimately looked at the blonde as if she, alone,
had hung the moon and the stars would most likely return the sentiment... What can she say, though -
Clarke was stubborn.)

Though they hadn't discussed the blonde's mission much, Clarke knew the Commander would be
good to her word. She also knew that she couldn't press the issue when the other girl had so many
other things to worry about - if anything, she wanted to alleviate the weight on Lexa's shoulders, not
add to it.

Clarke supposed that all the various chips would just have to fall where they may in time.
On the evening of her seventh day in Polis, Clarke found herself sitting on a bench on the right perimeter of the central marketplace, sketchbook resting on her lap and pencil in hand.

Lexa had returned the book to her at dinner time that evening, and Clarke had fought against every single fiber in her being to keep from throwing herself at the girl.

She'd simply settled for a "thank you," though, asking the Commander if she could head down to the market to draw before bed. She'd also added that she could go without a guard, considering the fact that Lexa would probably watch her from the window a few stories up, regardless.

Lexa had reluctantly agreed after a bit of coaxing, and Clarke practically skipped down the stairs of the tower to the market after that.

So here she sat, on the cold stone bench, hunched over her sketchpad and drawing the scene before her with newfound purpose, beyond-exuberant to have her lifeline back again.

As she'd predicted, Lexa now watched her closely from the window a few stories up, accompanied by Gustus who attempted to carry on a conversation with his distracted Commander. Clarke could feel the other girl's eyes searing into her profile the whole time, but she refused to meet the girl's gaze, far too engrossed in her drawings to care about being watched.

The sun had set long ago, and Clarke was surprised that the city center was still so bustling with it being dark out. She didn't question it, though, happy to have so many subjects to sketch in the torchlight.

Out of the blue, a few staggered gasps caused Clarke's head to whip up, eyes searching wildly for the source of the noise.

She noticed that the entire market seemed to have gone quiet all of a sudden, every single person in it having come to a stand still. Their gazes were all upturned towards the starry night sky, and Clarke followed the direction of their eyes immediately.

What she saw nearly stopped her heart.
It appeared as if a large gathering of mini comets were suddenly heading towards the atmosphere. The shapes would burn bluish before being engulfed in a purple flame and burning up completely as they grew closer.

Clarke suddenly felt like she couldn't breathe. Her blood was pounding in her ears as her head began to spin, body tensing up in preparation for the waves of agony threatening to overtake her.

Her mind immediately deduced what was happening, and - although she didn't know how she knew so concretely what was going on - the realization sent her reeling so hard that she felt as if her body might shut down altogether from the sensation.

Though she'd never seen such a sight from the ground before, she knew exactly what the little comets were without question:

_Bodies._

The bodies of the adolescent prisoners being released into space.
......I'll do my best to respond to comments on this one....don't kill me just yet hahaha (;
Clarke was running.

She didn't know why - or where she was going, for that matter - but she just had to run.

She vaguely registered the sound of what she knew to be Lexa yelling her name from the tower as she took off down the avenue, but she couldn't stop.

Her sketchbook and pencil were long forgotten on the ground as she ran away, and the symbolic separation from her lifeline was not lost on her.
Her leg screamed in protest as she sped up to what could only be described as a dead sprint, but she didn't care. In fact, she embraced the pain wholeheartedly.

She deserved it, after all.

Faces blurred past her - some still upturned towards the sky in confusion, others turning to watch their new healer's strange behavior as she flew by them.

Absently, Clarke realized that she was headed towards the main entrance of the city for whatever reason, but she still didn't stop.

Suddenly, it dawned on her what she wanted - what her new mission had to be.

She needed to get closer. She had to see them.

She needed to see them.

The large gate was already open due to a small group of merchants currently entering the city with their carts pulled behind them, and Clarke didn't so much as hesitate as she barreled past them.

She didn't know how she could run so fast with the world spinning before her as it was, her lungs fighting with everything they had to continue functioning.

The struggle was welcome, though.

A voice kept shouting to her from somewhere far behind her.

Her favorite voice.

But she had to get closer. She couldn't stop.
Making a beeline to her right once outside the gate, Clarke took off into the dark in search of what she was now looking for.

Blackness danced dangerously at the edges of her vision, but she wouldn't allow herself to succumb to it - to fail this time.

She couldn't fail them this time.

After what felt like hours of running blindly into the forest, stumbling over roots and snagging exposed skin on anything it brushed past, Clarke finally found what she was looking for.

An ancient tree seemed to shoot up into the night sky for miles directly in front of her, and she knew it would suffice.

As if on automatic pilot, Clarke began to climb hastily up its trunk, ignoring the agonizing throb of her right arm still not completely healed as she pulled herself up through the branches. She knew her ascent was clumsy and jarring to every inch of her frame, but she really didn't care.

She needed to get closer.

Her head was spinning to the point where she nearly couldn't see due to how disoriented she was. Her clothes clung to her body with sweat in the humid night air, and she felt the telltale signs of blood dripping from her fingers where she forced them to bear her weight as she climbed the rough wood.

The branches began to thin out towards the top, and Clarke knew she was almost there.

Her body was trembling almost uncontrollably as she slowed to a stop at the near-top of the tree.

She wrapped her arms around the trunk and dug her fingernails into the bark, ignoring the white-hot pain the action sent up the length of her arms. She knew her nails would begin to come off if she stayed like this for a long time.
She deserved whatever pain may come, though.

Clarke craned her neck up towards the sky and pressed her left cheek against the bark.

Her torso was visible above the wide expanse of canopy in every direction, and she vaguely registered the lights of Polis gleaming somewhere off in her right periphery.

There were a plethora of stars visible in the night sky, and they would've been a glorious sight to behold had Clarke not been focused on the last remaining bodies burning up in the atmosphere. They appeared to originate from the brightest star in the sky - what Clarke knew to be the Ark maintaining a steady orbit hundreds of miles away.

From this distance, Clarke's jaded mind almost believed that she could brush the same mist that the corpses had now merged with using the tips of her bloodied fingers - but the morbid thought soon left her as she focused on the more pressing matter at hand.

She needed to give them a funeral.

That's why she'd needed to get closer; she needed to be able to see them clearly - as clearly as a group of bodies could be seen from such a distance.

They deserved that much. They deserved to have someone truly see them as the physical evidence of their time in this life was brutally erased from the memory of this world.

It was the least that she could do at this point.

She knew she was the only one who could truly put their souls to rest now.

Even though she hadn't known them personally, they shared the same misfortune of having been born into a world in which even the dimmest of flames would be reaped for its heat and energy until it suffocated with a lack of oxygen. They all had begun burning their last wick the moment they took their first breath, and the paradox of taking one's first gulp of air through a punctured straw in which there was a limited supply to begin with was as tragic as it was inevitable in their current reality.
Beyond their painful similarities, Clarke also happened to be the one responsible for their deaths - which made her uniquely qualified to send them off.

Tears began to stream down her cheeks in haste, and her body trembled with barely-contained sobs as she brought forth the words that had been ingrained into her soul from the time that she was a child.

"In peace, may you leave the shore," she whispered, agony wracking her core with every syllable. "In love, may you find the next. Safe passage on your travels, until our final journey to the ground..."

Clarke's heart splintered under the pressure of the tremors that shook her frame now, threatening to bring her crashing down to the ground once more.

"May we meet again."

The pain she felt was almost too much.

Why had she been allowed to survive when her peers had been executed simply for having the misfortune of having to rely on her? Why had this burden been placed on her shoulders, to begin with?

She couldn't even feel hatred towards Jaha and the Council that had tasked her with such a mission that now weighed her down in every conceivable way.

She could only feel despair. Gut-wrenching, heart-clawing despair.

Clarke closed her eyes and leaned further into the bark of the tree that seemed to be the only thing that could tether her to consciousness. She silently cursed the man in the moon as sobs violently coursed through her.

"Clarke! Clarke, where are you?! Clarke!!"

Lexa's frantic voice called up to her from somewhere far below on the forest floor.
Clarke didn’t think she had the strength to answer the girl. She didn’t deserve the comfort Lexa’s presence would bring her, anyways.

She deserved to suffer in silence.

"Heda, look!" She heard what she believed to be Gustus address Lexa.

*You failed us, Clarke.*

Her mother’s voice was like nails on a chalkboard, clawing directly into her soul. Abby Griffin’s disapproving face danced beneath her closed eyelids and, for the first time in her life, Clarke wished the woman would just *go away.*

*Our blood is on your hands.*

A guttural sob ripped free from her chest and she dug her nails further into the bark, clinging onto her last ounce of strength as she felt warm blood begin to loosen her grip.

Just as she was about to succumb to the pull of gravity - and potentially allow herself to be set free - a warm body was suddenly pressed against her back, holding her in place where she gripped onto the tree for dear life.

A gentle hand came up to swipe the hair away from her face where it stuck to her right cheek with intermingled sweat and tears.

"I'm right here, Clarke. I've got you," Lexa's soft voice whispered into her ear, brushing hotly against the skin of her neck.

"Let go of the tree now. I will *not* let you fall..."

The double meaning of the words was not lost on Clarke. It only made her cry harder.
She felt Lexa's hands slide around her arms to lace with her own where she gripped the bark. A sharp intake of breath against her back told the blonde that the Commander could feel the blood running between her fingers.

"Beja, Klark," Lexa pleaded softly into her ear, pressing her body ever-closer against Clarke's. "Let me help you."

The fear that her irrational stunt in the tree could potentially endanger Lexa if they continued to remain in this position was the only thing that moved her body to comply.

She allowed Lexa to gingerly peel her right hand away from the bark, still laced in slender fingers, and slowly turn her around to face her.

Clarke was met with impossibly worried and sympathetic emeralds that silently pleaded with her to continue her cooperation. There was no trace of the Commander in the other girl's demeanor now - she was simply Lexa.

Trying to save Clarke from herself.

The brunette moved ever-so-carefully so that her body was in between Clarke's and the tree, their left hands still intertwined at an awkward angle around the trunk. Clarke allowed her left hand to be removed from the bark after a moment, and she felt herself suddenly wrapped in Lexa's criss-crossed arms around her body, the other girl leaning fully against the trunk now.

Clarke was able to see straight down to the forest floor - where Gustus stood anxiously at the base of the tree - and the length of the drop had her viciously shuddering.

"Shh, Klark, it's okay. You're okay." Lexa cooed from behind her, tightening her grip on the blonde's torso even more to alleviate the girl's trembling. "I'm right here. You're safe. Everything is going to be okay now. Do you trust me?"

Clarke nodded immediately, leaning back into Lexa's body infinitesimally more as she did so.

She felt what she believed to be the press of Lexa's lips against the side of her head in response, but she didn't have time to think about it as she was slowly being turned around in the other girl's grasp once more.
Lexa immediately tucked Clarke's head into her shoulder, reaching around to gingerly lace the blonde's bloodied hands around the back of her neck. A moment later, Clarke felt a strange jolt go through her body as strong hands hoisted her legs up around Lexa's waist.

Clarke was now clinging to Lexa's front like a koala, and she latched her damaged fingers onto the collar of the Commander's jacket as the brunette began her careful descent to the forest floor.

She didn't know how Lexa was doing it; only recently-healed from the arrow wounds, the girl still managed to all-but-levitate from branch to branch as they made their way down. How she was managing to do so with one hand braced against Clarke's back the entire time, the blonde had absolutely zero clue.

Lexa had whispered gentle and calming phrases of Trigedaslang into the blonde's ear from the moment she'd begun to move, and Clarke felt fresh tears continue to form in her eyes at the pure tenderness in the words.

She didn't deserve such treatment right now.

She didn't deserve Lexa right now.

Before she knew it, Clarke felt a gentle thud as Lexa landed gracefully on the ground once more. She heard the Commander swiftly order something to Gustus in Trig before she heard the man comply and move away from the two girls.

Clarke's eyes remained closed where her face was now tucked into the crook of Lexa's neck as the brunette walked forward a couple of steps, lowering them to the ground after a moment.

The Commander sat with her legs crossed as she situated Clarke comfortably in her lap - the blonde's legs and arms still wrapped tightly around the other girl. Lexa began rubbing soothing circles into the blonde's back with one hand, lacing her fingers in blonde locks with the other.

"What happened, Clarke?" she asked gently after a beat, continuing her calming ministrations on the blonde in her arms. "What were those strange stars?"
Clarke sniffled a bit against Lexa's neck, having calmed just the slightest bit in the brunette's tender embrace.

"B-bodies... They were bodies, Lexa," Clarke choked out, barely in control of her own voice as she struggled to breath properly.

Lexa's breath hitched a bit as her hold on Clarke tightened almost imperceptibly.

"I thought you were given two months, Clarke..." the brunette trailed off, her soft voice suddenly tinged in uncertainty.

Of course the Commander understood immediately who the bodies had belonged to - and why, as a result, Clarke was so distraught over their loss.

No one quite understood her like Lexa did at this point.

Clarke simply buried her face further into soft waves of brunette where it tickled her cheek.

"I...was," she replied miserably, gripping impossibly tighter onto the collar of Lexa's jacket with her wounded fingers. "I-I don't know...what happened, I -"

Her voice broke as she struggled against fresh sobs bubbling up in her throat.

Lexa simply pulled her closer.

"I had to send them off, Lexa. I had to see them.... They deserved to be seen by someone before they were all gone. I had to..." She desperately tried to explain as her broken voice was muffled against the brunette's shoulder.

"It's my fault. They're dead because of me -"

"No, Clarke," Lexa cut her off immediately, abruptly stopping her ministrations.
She brought both hands around to move Clarke's head away from where it was tucked against her shoulder with impossible gentleness, cupping the blonde's cheeks as she rested their foreheads together - the blonde's eyes remaining closed the entire time.

It was, perhaps, the most intimate position Clarke could ever recall being in.

"This is not your fault, do you understand me?" Lexa's voice was much more firm now as she spoke with a quiet intensity Clarke had never heard before.

"You cannot be blamed for the atrocities your leaders commit under the guise of desperation... They were the ones who failed to remain true to their word, for whatever reason - a travesty which my people would not be quick to forgive."

Lexa's voice was practically steel as she addressed the blonde now, holding the girl's face much in the same way she had when they'd danced - like it was the most precious thing she'd ever had the privilege of holding.

"I know why you are quick to shoulder the blame for such a betrayal, though... It is always the purest of heart who bear the brunt of such grievances - for their souls simply have the cleanest slate, the most room to house the sins of those who are truly guilty..."

The soft pads of Lexa's thumbs began to stroke the sides of her face, brushing across her cheeks like the softest of feathers seeking to clear away the settled dust of a broken world.

"But you must understand something, Clarke: this is not your fault. This will never be your fault, regardless of what anyone might tell you. Do you hear me?"

Clarke couldn't move. She could barely breath as Lexa held her in such a way, told her such things.

"Clarke, listen to me," the brunette imbibed her passionately, moving so that she could pull Clarke impossibly closer to her.

Their noses were brushing now.
"If you need someone to shoulder the blame for you right now, let me do it. I will take it from you. Blame me... I was the one who kept you from radioing back to your people, after all."

Lexa's voice shook a little with the emotion behind her words.

"My soul is the furthest thing from a blank slate, and, for as long as I live, I will continue to tread in the blood of thousands who I cannot - and will not - ever be able to save - whose deaths will forever be the product of my shortcomings... So, let me take this from you now. Let this be my burden to bear, Clarke."

She felt the weight of Lexa's words sink deep beneath her skin, merging with the very blood in her veins and pumping directly back into her heart. They were already beginning to fill the tiny cracks she hadn't realized were now lacing her core with throbbing fissures - but she wouldn't allow them to heal her completely.

She would never blame Lexa for this (as she couldn't fault the girl for being cautious in her need to protect her people), but the fact that the other girl was so willing to lay her soul out in the open for Clarke's woes to tarnish filled her with an almost indescribable warmth - with an emotion so powerful it threatened to undo her very existence.

She immediately knew what it was. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she'd always known.

"Clarke?" Lexa's soft voice brought her out of her warm revery, grounding her once more.

"Beja... I need you to let me take this from you." The desperation in Lexa's voice almost caught Clarke off-guard.

She supposed she shouldn't be surprised by just how deeply Lexa cared at this point - more than anyone she'd ever met, as a matter-of-fact, though she pretended not to most of the time. She could never hide her true nature from Clarke, though.

Clarke finally allowed herself to react for the first time since Lexa had started speaking, shaking her head firmly against where it rested on the brunette's forehead still.
She felt Lexa go rigid at her refusal, but before the girl could say anything else, Clarke moved her head so that it rested against the crook of Lexa's shoulder once more. The brunette's arms slackened around her body, reflecting just how thrown she was by Clarke's response.

The blonde simply adjusted so that she could clasp both injured hands around the back of Lexa's neck and lace her fingers - now caked in dried blood - into silky brunette locks as the other girl remained frozen.

In the attempt to make up for what she simply couldn't say just yet - to explain why she had so adamantly refused the girl's pleading -, Clarke turned her head a little and pressed her lips into the side of Lexa's neck, right above the girl's pulse point.

The kiss was more tender than anything Clarke would've believed herself to be capable of, and she knew she'd done the right thing when she felt Lexa's entire body shudder as if struck by a bolt of electricity at the feel of Clarke's lips on her bare skin.

Seeming to somewhat understand Clarke's refusal now, the brunette's arms found their way around Clarke's body once more, one hand wrapping around to grip the shirt at the small of Clarke's back while the other laced in blonde locks once again. It was as if Lexa was attempting to physically fuse their bodies into one as she held Clarke tighter than anyone ever had, and the blonde relished in their unreasonable closeness.

Lexa began to gently rock them back and forth where they continued to sit on the forest floor, lulling Clarke into a dreamlike state as the sounds of the night wrapped them in a beautiful cocoon interwoven with a thousand burning stars far above their heads.

The next thing Clarke knew, she was being tucked into the luscious furs of her bed with utmost care. She fell into the blackness for another moment.

A wet cloth scrubbing lightly away at her fingers brought her back, but she couldn't manage to open her eyes to see her caretaker as she felt a couple of her fingers being wrapped in what she knew to be gauze.
The pressure on her hands was gone, and Clarke felt her arms being tucked slowly beneath the covers.

Furrowing her brows at the sudden loss of warmth in her half-asleep state, she brought her right hand out from beneath the fur covering almost immediately - despite how much that arm ached now - and began to reach out blindly, her eyes glued shut.

A warmth like she'd never felt before washed over her when slender fingers gently intertwined themselves with her own outstretched - and bandaged - ones, bringing her arm back down as she felt a dip in the bed beside her.

Their hands remained laced together as Clarke turned over, facing her peace of mind as the other girl pulled her closer.

After another moment, she drifted off into a dreamless sleep with her forehead pressed to Lexa's, both hands now intertwined between them where they faced each other.

Perhaps Clarke had found a new lifeline.
Clarke's right hand shook where she grasped the radio.

Her aching fingers protested having the hold the device in her hand, and she longed to just throw it back down and retreat to her bed.

She didn't know if she could do this now.

Bringing her out of her spiraling uncertainties, Lexa placed a comforting hand on the small of her back, meeting fearful blues with an admirable level of confidence shining in the emeralds.

"Remember what we talked about, Clarke," Lexa instructed her gently, eyes soft as she regarded the blonde. "Our goal is diplomacy. No matter what happens, we will continue to work for a peaceful negotiation between our people... Nothing less."

Clarke nodded, steeling herself with pursed lips and a furrowed brow.

When she had woken up that morning, her bandaged hands were still laced in Lexa's, her leg wrapped around the other girl's thigh, and her head tucked beneath Lexa's chin, as well.

The blonde had blushed furiously when she'd realized just how close they were, slowly removing her leg from where it was latched onto Lexa and pushing away a little so that she could retrieve her hands - which were all but numb beneath the gauze at that point.

Though she'd tried to be careful so as not to wake the other girl, Lexa immediately stirred at the loss of Clarke's warmth, and glorious green eyes locked onto her face in a moment of pure stillness between the two of them.

They silently passed the emotion that neither could name yet back-and-forth between them as their gaze remained locked for an infinite amount of time.

Lexa was the first to stir, though, slightly disgruntled at the fact that she'd fallen asleep in her long coat - which Clarke found inconceivably adorable - and she moved off of the bed so that she could gather herself properly.
She'd turned to Clarke almost immediately afterwards and had begun describing how she wanted the blonde to approach communication with her people.

Clarke had been momentarily stunned by the subject, but immediately shook herself out of it and gave Lexa her full attention.

The brunette was every bit the Commander as she explained to Clarke exactly how she wanted the blonde to go about the conversation: the end goal was successful integration of the Arkers and Grounders upon the former's arrival on Earth. There was plenty of room for them to share the land in peace if they did this correctly, but the Commander needed to make sure that Clarke's people understood the gravity of their situation.

They had to tread ever-so-carefully from the time of their first correspondence if they wanted the plan to work out for everyone involved.

Once Clarke made initial contact, gauged the situation, and figured out what in the hell had happened on the Ark that had caused such a change of plan, she and Lexa would continue to hash out more concrete details of what they were going to do from there-on-out.

They just needed to get the proper information in order to do so first.

So, here they stood in Clarke's room, both slightly hunched over the radio where it sat on the wooden table that Lexa had brought in and placed upon.

The Commander had cleared her schedule for the morning, informing her generals and closest advisor that she was not to be disturbed during her dealings with the Skaikru, as she'd called the Arkers. She'd faced no resistance from them as she'd locked herself and Clarke away in the blonde's room for the time-being, every single one of them understanding the importance of their Commander's latest endeavor.

"You can do this, Clarke," Lexa told her firmly, hand still resting comfortably on Clarke's back. "I'll be right here the entire time."

Clarke nodded once more, sucking in a shaky breath in the attempts to calm her racing heart.

She could do this.
She pressed down on the receiver's button.

"Earth to Ark Station, come in," she spoke somewhat breathlessly into the little handheld radio. "Ark Station, do you copy?"

Clarke held her breath for a moment as she was greeted by silence on the other end of the radio. Would the radio even work after all it had been through at this point?

"Earth to Ark Station, do you read me?"

After a ridiculously long moment of silence, the radio began to crackle on the other end.

Lexa's hand gripped onto Clarke's shirt at the sound.

"Uh, potentially..." a female voice spoke up suddenly from the other end. "Depends on who the hell this is."

Clarke's eyes widened in surprise at the unfamiliar voice, and she met Lexa's similarly-shocked expression for a moment before finding her voice.

"Th-this is Clarke Griffin. I landed on Earth a little over a month ago, and I lost my wristband somehow when I crashed... Who is this?"

The crackling in the radio intensified for a moment as Clarke heard the sound of the girl hastily conversing with another much deeper voice in the background. She couldn't make out what they were saying through the static, though.

"No. Shit!!" the female exclaimed in excited disbelief after a moment. "Clarke Griffin?! As in the Clarke Griffin - the chick who's supposed to have been dead for four weeks?! I'll be damned..."

Lexa and Clarke exchanged confused glances as they waited for the girl to process her surprise.

"So, that must mean the Earth is survivable, then? I freaking knew it!! I know about eight people
who owe me a shot of whisky right now... What the hell happened to you, Griffin?" The girl sounded genuinely curious, her voice colored with overwhelming excitement.

Clarke furrowed her brows for a moment, taking a deep breath before she answered.

"Long story short, I crash landed and hurt myself pretty badly," she replied, voice slightly hesitant to elaborate on her journey to a girl she didn't even know the name of.

"I was found by a couple of the people living here, and they've been helping me recover ever since."

It was the shortest version of the truth she could afford to offer up at this point, still incredibly wary of this other girl.

"No way!! There are people living down there?!" the girl's voice sounded awe-stricken and utterly taken aback all at the same time. "I can't believe it..."

The radio went quiet for a moment as the girl attempted to process her shock once again. Lexa and Clarke shared yet another look, silently praying that this girl could be trusted.

"Oh, yeah... The name's Raven, by the way - Raven Reyes."

The name sounded oddly familiar to Clarke for some reason, but she couldn't quite place it off the top of her head.

"Nice to meet you, I guess," Clarke conceded drily into the radio, shaking her head a little bit in exasperation.

"Now, tell me - what in the hell is going on up there, Raven? I saw the bodies..." Clarke choked on the last word, unable to say anything else around the lump lodged in her throat.

Lexa moved her hand from Clarke's back to lace firmly into the blonde's left hand.

The Commander nodded once, giving Clarke all the encouragement she needed to continue.
"I don't even know where to begin, Griffin," Raven spoke somewhat more quietly now, voice tinged with begrudging dismay.

"Let's see... Well, the minute your mom found out that your wristband had stopped working, she went a little ballistic... I was fixing one of the air conditioners in the council room - a thankless job, I might add - when she came blazing in there like a chicken with her head cut off... No one even saw me in there, they just started shouting at each other - that's when I found out that they'd sent you down."

Clarke heard Raven take a steadying breath on the other end of the line.

"She kept threatening to expose Jaha for the shithead that he is - pulling a stunt like that without thinking anything through, as usual - but Marcus Kane stepped in and convinced the two of them to chill out. He reminded them that you had two months to make contact, and that it couldn't possibly mean anything that your wristband went out - what with the distance between the Ark and the ground being so great, and all. They just needed to give it time..."

Clarke could almost hear the eye-roll she was certain Raven gave on the other side of the radio.

"After that, everything basically went to shit," Raven stated as if it was the most casual observance in the world, and Clarke found herself having to choke back morbid laughter at the shrug she very nearly heard in the girl's tone.

"A few people started reporting some pretty serious side-effects of oxygen deprivation - which seems pretty irreversible at this point -, nobody can really figure out what kind of animal crawled up Jaha's ass and died there in recent weeks, and - oh, I almost forgot to mention!!"

Raven sounded somewhat hysterical as she spoke the next words.

"They just jumped the gun and murdered 50 of the prisoners for no goddamn reason, considering the Earth is actually survivable and all." The other girl laughed humorlessly on the other end of the radio.

She seemed to be on the verge of tears.
Clarke was stunned into silence for a moment, attempting to process what she'd just heard.

50 prisoners.

So, they hadn't killed them all, then...

Despite herself - and despite knowing it was hardly a victory -, Clarke still breathed a small and shaky sigh of relief at the news. Her soul didn't seem to know what to make of the information, though.

Does it really matter the number of lives you take? One life taken is enough to unravel the fiber of a person's being for the rest of their days...

"Raven, I -" Clarke swallowed, struggling against the lump in her throat still. "I'm so sorry. I never meant for any of that to happen..."

She felt Lexa squeeze her hand to grab her attention, and she looked over at the brunette who was shaking her head ever-so-slightly with furrowed brows - as if to keep her from spiraling further into her misery.

"Aw, come on, it's not your fault, Clarke," Raven reassured her after a beat, sounding truly genuine as she spoke. "Jaha and his Council of fuckwads are to blame for this one, trust me... I mean, who in their right mind kills a bunch of kids for no good reason before he even knows whether or not it's necessary?!"

Clarke's eyes narrowed at that.

"Wait a minute - 'whether or not it's necessary?' What do you mean?" Clarke pressed, leaning forward a little bit with intensity.

Raven huffed into the radio.

"I'm not stupid, Griffin," she responded as if it was the most obvious fact in the world. "I know about the Ark. I know it's dying... With the amount of people suffering from oxygen deprivation in the
clinics right now, I'd say we have about nine good months left - give or take a couple weeks. Your mom's been up to her eyeballs in patients ever since you left..."

Clarke pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger, breathing through her body's unwillingness to accept this information. She had known it would get bad, but being faced with the facts like this was...difficult.

"Wait, if there's still that much oxygen left, why does my mom have so many patients all of a sudden? Surely there can't be that many people suffering yet..."

Clarke trailed off, suddenly very unsure of herself.

"Oh, yeah, right," Raven responded, as if coming to her senses a little bit. "Only some people have started seeing side effects from deprivation - the rest are in there 'cause of all the riots that've been happening lately... Tough shit when you're crammed into a metal death trap with a bunch of people you don't see eye-to-eye with, right?"

Again, Raven sounded far too casual to be assessing such a dire situation. Clarke admired her wit, though.

"Riots?" Clarke questioned, utterly disbelieving.

She'd never known her people to resort to violence in her time on the Ark.

"Oh, yeah - all the time now, actually," Raven answered nonchalantly. "A few angry Laborers have noticed Jaha's lack of...focus recently, and they've banded together under Diana Sydney's leadership - if that's what you even wanna call it - to try and force an early election for a new Chancellor - emphasis on the force... The riots got ten times worse this morning when everyone figured out that their kids had been murdered in the middle of the night - way too many people to float.. They think it's Jaha trying to change the way we do things through some kind of display of brutality, but the small group of us who actually know what's going on have come to the conclusion that he's just doing whatever's necessary to try and stay in power at this point... Maybe he even thought it was a good way to lesson the strain on resources while he was at it - who the fuck knows, Griff?"

Clarke began to massage her temple with her free hand against the strain this new information was putting on her mind.
It was all too much.

Lexa squeezed her hand once more, ever the comforting reminder that she wasn't leaving Clarke's side any time soon.

"So, if I'm getting this right... Jaha's lost his mind and everyone else has resorted to violent chaos to try and get their way while they're continuing to slowly suffocate to death?" Clarke summarized in an exceptionally tired voice.

"Yep, pretty much," Raven quipped happily in response.

Clarke very nearly groaned.

"Wonderful... So, why are you the one who got stuck manning the radio, then?" Clarke inquired after she composed herself a bit.

"Well, technically, I'm not exactly stuck... As a matter of fact, I'm surprised I haven't gotten absolutely filleted for being in here yet... This guy - what's your name again?" She spoke away from the receiver a little, addressing someone else who was apparently nearby.

The deep voice she'd heard earlier, perhaps.

"Right, got it... This guy - Bellamy Blake - helped me break in here using his keycard. Ya see, he's active in the guard, so he's got clearance for the Ark's main control room - which is where we are now... His sister's in lock-up - along with my boyfriend - and I'm trying to re-program his card so that it'll give us access to the prison hold."

Clarke's eyes widened in disbelief as Raven continued.

"So, truth be told, you really just got lucky that I'm the one who answered your little Earth-to-Ark calling card... I'm sure anyone else you could've spoken to would've been significantly less awesome than me."

Clarke shook her head, rolling her eyes at Raven's boasting. If she was being honest, though, she
kind of admired the other girl's confidence.

"And what's your plan once you fix his card, then?" Clarke inquired after a beat, barely-contained disapproval seeping into her tone.

"Oh, simple: we're gonna break into the prison, find Finn and Octavia, and get 'em the hell out of there... Easy."

Clarke actually did laugh this time as she saw Lexa legitimately facepalm herself in her periphery, dragging her free hand down her face after she did so.

"That's possibly the worst plan I've ever heard, Raven. Seriously... Thanks for the laugh, though," she told the girl earnestly, still trying to compose herself a little.

"Well, what do you suggest from down there, then, Griffin? 'Cause I sure as hell don't feel like running to fetch good 'ole Thelonius from the middle of a perfectly-timed riot... No fucking way," Raven spat back hotly, clearly perturbed by Clarke's reaction.

Lexa stepped closer to Clarke, silently communicating that now was the time to set their plan in motion.

Clarke nodded.

"Listen, Raven," Clarke began, lacing every ounce of authority into her voice that she was capable of. "You and Bellamy need to find my mom - Kane, too, if you trust him to be somewhat reasonable at this point. We need as many Council members on our side as possible if we're going to succeed here... Tell my mom that I'm alive - that I'm alright - and that I'm waiting to speak with her on the other end of this radio... If everything works out, you'll be one of the people responsible for finally bringing the Ark back to the ground. Can you do that, Raven?"

Clarke tried to keep the desperation out of her voice as she spoke, but she knew she probably faltered a little bit.

There was crackling on the other side of the radio, and Clarke heard Raven conversing with who she now knew to be Bellamy off in the background.
Her heart pounded as she awaited a response.

"I mean..." Raven spoke finally, sounding more hesitant now than Clarke had heard her throughout the entire course of their conversation.

"How can you be so sure that your mom's gonna help us out, Clarke? When has she - or any other adult on this stupid spaceship, for that matter - ever proved to be reasonable when it comes to stuff like this? She's always followed the Council's laws to a 't.' I just... I don't know, Griffin."

Clarke's brow creased at the thorough uncertainty in Raven's tone.

Lexa squeezed her hand once more, giving Clarke a look of utter confidence as she regarded the blonde from beneath her stoic mask now.

Clarke had to make this work.

"Raven, if you and Bellamy do this for me, I can promise you that the Commander of the 12 Clans will personally see to it that the two of you, Octavia, and Finn are taken care of when you get down here. She will protect you... You have my word."

Lexa nodded her approval at Clarke's words, seeming to accept the reasonable logistics of securing safety for four teenagers amongst her people.

All they had to do was make it to Polis, after all.

That is, if Octavia and Finn were even still alive at this point. For Raven and Bellamy's sake - and for the sake of their plan - she sincerely hoped they were.

"Woah, woah, woah - 12 Clans?!" Raven sounded absolutely stunned by that. "Exactly how many people are there, Clarke?! And how can we trust that they're peaceful - that they'll be okay with us crashing down into their territory all of a sudden?! I sure as hell wouldn't be very friendly to someone if they came barreling into my dorm and tried to steal my Scooby snacks. Pardon the dated reference - I enjoy watching re-runs of pre-bombing cartoons in my spare time..."
Clarke shook her head, feeling the strong urge to reach through the radio and shake the ridiculous girl by both of her shoulders.

Before she could react, though, Lexa brought their intertwined hands up to her mouth and pressed a gentle kiss to the back of Clarke's hand in hers - as if to demonstrate just how peaceful the Grounders could be.

Clarke nearly dropped dead right then. In fact, she probably would have had it not been for the fact that dying mid-conversation was probably exceptionally rude.

"Sh-they're...p-peaceful, Raven. Trust me," Clarke stammered, struggling to calm her racing heart. "They've been nothing but kind to me since I've gotten here, and I would've died ten times over had it not been for them... Their Commander is the best leader I've ever had the privilege of meeting, and she will remain true to what I've told you. I promise."

At Clarke's words, Lexa's eyes softened to an impossibly beautiful shade of green, regarding the blonde with absolute awe as her eyes glistened a bit.

Clarke had never seen the other girl appear so touched before.

Suddenly, the radio crackled to life with a very different voice speaking through it.

"Well, anything's gotta be better than this," the much deeper, gravelly voice of who she figured to be Bellamy Blake spoke to her now.

"If protection is what you're offering us all here, you and your Commander have yourselves a deal, Princess... We'll find your mom and bring her to you."

Clarke closed her eyes, smiling ever-so-slightly at the small victory - also somewhat amused by the fact that she apparently couldn't escape the title of "princess," regardless of where she went.

"Thank you, Bellamy," she told the boy sincerely, overwhelmingly grateful for his cooperation. "I promise - we will help you if you do this... You'll be taken care of."
The radio crackled once again as Raven apparently snatched the receiver back from Bellamy.

"We better be," she responded drily, wry amusement evident in her voice.

Lexa smiled softly at Clarke now as they looked at each other, seemingly pleased with having succeeded in getting one step closer towards their end goal.

"Listen, it might take a little while to get your mom here, Clarke," Raven spoke more seriously now, voice a bit hushed. "Bellamy and I barely made it here to begin with, what with the riot going on and all... It's bad, Griff - super, super bad... But, we'll do the best we can to get your mom away from the clinic without Jaha or any of the other asshats seeing us... No promises on how long that'll take, though - so stay near the damn radio, will ya?"

Clarke chuckled a little bit, feeling tears stinging the backs of her eyes for some reason now.

Lexa squeezed her hand again, and Clarke found herself completely overwhelmed with that emotion she refused to name once more at the comfort the brunette was bringing her. Since she'd first acknowledged it, Clarke had found herself practically drowning in it with every second she continued to spend in the Commander's presence.

Truth be told, she had never been so happy to drown in anything in her entire life.

"If Jingle Bells and I make it through this whole shindig without managing to get our sorry asses floated, I will personally weave you and this allusive Commander you speak of matching gift baskets," Raven promised, voice tinged in that same wry amusement once again.

"In fact, I'll fill them both with all the handmade grenades and explosive devices your little hearts could desire - courtesy of yours truly, of course. I'll even paint them pretty colors if you want me to... What's your favorite color? Do you know the Commander's - ?"

"Raven!"

Bellamy's voice cut the mechanic's babbling short, sounding beyond-exasperated on the other end of the line.
Clarke had to stifle another laugh.

"Right. Sorry - I'll shut up," Raven conceded quickly, a smile plain in her voice.

Her voice turned much more serious after another moment, though.

"We gotta go now, Griff. We'll try to be back with your mom as soon as possible, but no promises, alright? It may take some time..."

"That's totally fine, Raven. I understand," Clarke responded immediately, sounding every bit as grateful as she felt.

She would seriously owe these two if they came through for her.

"Alright... We've got ourselves a game plan, then, Princess."

The fact that Raven's tone of voice made it sound like she and Bellamy would be up to absolutely no good didn't exactly reassure Clarke, but she decided to brush the other girl's strangely-devious tone aside in favor of trust.

It was truly her only option at this point, anyways.

"Reyes, out."

With that, the radio went dead, leaving Clarke to stare down at the device with a slightly bewildered expression on her face.

A thick silence fell over her and Lexa for a moment, their hands still intertwined between them.

Clarke cleared her throat after a beat, removing her bandaged hand gently from Lexa's to move forward and set the receiver back on the radio.

After another lingering moment, she turned to face the Commander once again.
"Well," she began, attempting to sound somewhat light now, "that went a little *differently* than I expected it to... Not bad, though, right?"

She could feel uncertainty overtaking her features as Lexa took a step towards her, effectively closing the distance between them once more.

"You did very well, Clarke," she informed the blonde, tone reassuring as she looked upon the girl with a calm expression. "You are so much more capable than you give yourself credit for."

Before Clarke could respond in any way to the kind words, a pounding on the doors to Clarke's room startled the two girls out of whatever moment they could've had.

"*Heda!*" a desperate voice cried from the other side of the doors, continuing to bang on the oak. "Come quick!! We need you - and the healer, too! There's been an attack!!"

Clarke and Lexa glanced at each other in confusion at the vagueness of the words for a moment, but they both quickly sprung into action after a beat.

Lexa turned and hurried towards the door, Clarke right on her heels.

The Commander quickly unlocked the doors and threw them open, revealing a desperate-looking warrior right in front of them.

His face was extremely pale, and Clarke's eyes widened at the sight of blood splattered all over his person.

"What happened, *gona*?" Lexa inquired, her tone hard as steel as the three of them raced towards the elevator.

As soon as they were shut inside the metallic contraption, it lurched to life and began carrying them hastily downwards.

"One of the twelve scouts you sent on reconnaissance - on a *peaceful* mission - to *Azgeda* has returned, and... H-he is the only one left, *Heda.*"
The warrior looked as if he might faint as he took in his Commander's expression in response to his words.

Lexa's face was positively _livid_ beneath her mask now.

She was managing to conceal the depth of her anger pretty well, but Clarke knew the other girl was probably only _just_ keeping it together as they descended through the tower.

Clarke subtly placed an injured hand over Lexa's forearm where it brushed against her a little bit, attempting to placate the other girl in any way she could.

Lexa's eyes instantly snapped over to meet Clarke's sympathetic gaze, and she softened ever-so-slightly beneath the blonde's touch.

After another moment, the elevator creaked to a stop, and Clarke quickly removed her hand as she made to follow the Commander and her warrior already hastening from the elevator.

They veered to the right and approached the end of the hallway with blistering speed, two guards ready to throw the doors to the clinic open for their Commander when she arrived.

Clarke followed behind the other two as they burst into the room.

Nyko, Anya, Indra, and Gustus gathered around one of the beds at the far end of the otherwise-empty clinic immediately caught Clarke's attention. She made her way from behind Lexa and the warrior, hurrying to Nyko's side and readying herself to assist her mentor.

As she turned to looked down towards the patient for the first time, she had to fight back the urge to vomit at the sight before her.

Sprawled on the bed in full warrior's garb was a boy not much older than Clarke, blood and grime covering every inch of his olive skin, caked solidly into his dark hair. There was far too much blood - Clarke couldn't even tell which parts of his body it was coming from. It appeared to run from his hairline, out of his nose, and even bubbled out of his mouth as he attempted to catch his breath. His torso was positively _soaked_ in the scarlet substance.
He'd clearly been tortured.

"Heda," he rasped, tone agonized as he began to reach blindly for his Commander.

Lexa approached him to stand on the opposite side of the bed from where Clarke and Nyko were, a space having been cleared for the Commander by her three generals who had moved away from the bed to stand with the other warrior.

Clarke quickly grabbed a cloth from the bedside table and wiped at the injured warrior's face, trying the best she could to sop up some of the blood he was currently drowning in.

"I...bring a...message...from the Haiplana," he choked out, barely managing to speak past the blood now pouring out of his mouth.

Clarke helped Nyko turn the warrior onto his side in the hopes that his airways would be slightly less clogged in this position.

Lexa knelt down beside the dying warrior, taking one of his hands in both of her own and meeting his gaze with a fiery intensity burning beneath her mask.

"Speak true, gona," she commanded him firmly, voice flat as she looked upon the warrior. Her eyes were a metallic steel now.

They all knew that he was soon to be done for.

Clarke felt lightheaded suddenly as she looked down at the warrior, and she shook her head a little to shoo away the strange sensation.

"She says...she knows about...the...skai gada, Heda," he whispered, gurgling a little on the blood still pouring from his orifices in streams. "She...wanted me to...tell you -"

He stopped abruptly, struggling against a clot of blood that he weakly hacked out of his throat. Lexa quickly moved out of its trajectory, un-phased as she moved back and urged him to continue after a moment.
Clarke was feeling really off all of a sudden.

"This...is...a...trap."

With those words, he began to convulse on the bed, succumbing to fits of seizures as his body fought its final battle.

Clarke stumbled back a step, allowing Nyko to move forward and grab the warrior in the attempt to steady him through his final moments.

Her head was swimming. Her limbs felt too heavy.

Something was wrong.

She stumbled back another step as Lexa rose from her crouch, looking extremely troubled as she watched the warrior choke over his final breath.

Clarke's ears began to ring as her vision blurred around the edges.

Everything sounded so far away now.

She felt a wetness on her cheek.

Fighting against the lead now weighing her limbs down, Clarke moved her left hand to swipe at the substance on her face.

She held her hand out in front of her, struggling to focus on it through the blurry haze.

It was bloody.
Freshly bloodied - not from anything that could've seeped through the bandages on her fingers.

Was she *crying* blood?

Clarke looked past her hand to see six pairs of eyes on her now.

They all looked upon her in complete and utter shock.

She stumbled back another step, feeling her knees beginning to give out.

"*Lexa...*"

Her whisper seemed to call from the very depths of her soul in a last-ditch effort to reach the very ears of the one person she so desperately needed in this moment.

The last thing Clarke saw before her world faded to black was a pair of horrified green eyes rushing towards her.
Clarke was not morbid by nature, no.

But she was nothing if not logical.

And, in her logical mind, she knew she was probably going to die.
Everything was just so dark.

So painful.

It was as if she was dangling from the edge of an infinite precipice - the only thing keeping her from falling a force she couldn't recognize, couldn't quite name.

It wasn't doing much to quell the pain, though.

Her entire body felt as if it were melting from its core outward, setting her aflame in perhaps the most literal way possible - short of actually lighting her on fire. Her thoughts had become a frenzied blur, flashing between random and unrelated memories in such a jarring manner that Clarke believed the fever had truly snapped something vital within her mind.

Or, perhaps, this was what it felt like to have one's life flash before their eyes - in a quite vivid and nightmarish sort of way, at that.

Though she was not truly conscious enough to process anything from beneath her closed eyelids, she could feel the hot blood seeping out of quite literally every orifice on her body: her eyes, nose, ears, mouth - you name it. She didn't even know it was possible for one human being to bleed so much without actually being cut open in some way...

She figured that maybe this was her body's way of personifying some sort of brutal metaphor - one in which her soul literally expunges itself of every possible toxin plaguing it by way of a masochistic (and deadly) blood-cleansing.

She supposed she shouldn't be surprised, though: if it wasn't mental torture that life was forcing her to endure, physical torture would most certainly do the trick, wouldn't it?

Clarke would've, perhaps, tried to beg for mercy on her soul's behalf - or something along those lines - at some point, but she wouldn't have even known who to force her frenzied mind to pray to, in the first place, let alone how to formulate any coherent pleas.
Conversing with hallucinations of her dead father had always brought her more tangible comfort than seeking the unattainable mercy of an unresponsive god, anyways.

Voices.

Clarke was hearing voices.

They surrounded her, weaving through her mind like the most appealing soundtrack she'd ever heard. She longed to respond to them in some way, let them know that she was, in fact, capable of such a seemingly unconquerable feat - but every effort she tried to muster ended up rattling back to her own conscience, furthering her state of painful unrest within her dying body.

One voice was louder than the rest, though - so much louder.

Her favorite voice.

It called to her like nothing ever had, causing her heart to sputter unevenly where it already pounded uncomfortably in every inch of her skin.

She needed to get to that voice, needed to do something to quiet it somehow - relieve it of the visceral panic that dripped from every audible note in its lilt.

It rattled around in her head like some sort of indecipherable frequency and, for some reason, she couldn't quite make out what it was saying - not clearly enough for her understanding, anyway.

It was causing her a great deal of uneasiness in her tortured state, and the helplessness she felt was beginning to overwhelm her more than the fever that sought to consume the rest of her.
Perhaps Clarke should just fall back into the darkness once more. It was so much more peaceful there.

Only for a moment, though...

Her favorite voice...

"Clarke!! Clarke, can you hear me?! Beja, Klark... Come back!"

"Your fight is not over, do you understand me?!"

"Clarke, please..."

"Don't you dare give up!! Not now - not ever."

"You have to fight now, Clarke..."

It wasn't supposed to sound like that...

_No one _should ever sound like that - so desperate, so panicked, so broken._
No, this couldn't be right...

Clarke needed to do something, needed to fix this somehow.

Never in her worst nightmares could she have imagined the amount of torment hearing that one particular voice - the soundtrack to every single one of her favorite dreams, the music she so longed to capture within her mind for the rest of her days - crying out in such a way would put her through.

Clarke believed it had to be something close to despair.

A kind of despair that was screaming right back at her from beneath the chords of what used to be the most breathtaking symphony she'd ever had the privilege of hearing...

Everything was shaking.

She'd never experienced anything like it before - nothing had ever felt so violent.

Was this what it felt like to be caught in one of those earthquakes she used to read about as a child? Were they normally so all-encompassing - so jarring?

Did they normally rattle the very skeleton beneath its fleshy protection to the point of near-shattering?

Hands on her skin.
"No!! Don't hold her down!!"

"But - "

"I said, no!! The more we try to stabilize her, the more danger we put her in!! She must simply work through this on her own..."

Clarke believed it would probably be less painful to simply allow her body to dissolve into a pile of dust to be scattered fitfully about in the wind...

The swish of fabric.

Every few seconds.

Someone was pacing at the end of her bed, most likely. Back-and-forth - carving a miserable trail in the floor, no doubt.

The soft sweep of a wet cloth across her forehead, down her cheeks, across her chin, and around to the back of her neck - so refreshing, so gentle.
Clarke wanted to open her eyes, wanted to tell them that she was alright - that she was going to make it - but she felt trapped.

*This is a trap.*

Is this what the warrior had meant? The kind of trap that forged an internalized prison out of her own body, keeping her voice caged within its recessive confines?

In the back of her hazy mind, she began to note the sensation of heat - as if someone had started a fire somewhere near her person and was gradually stoking the flames as she became more aware. Except she was pretty sure there was no fireplace in the clinic...

How odd.

The creaking sound of opening doors brought her out of the darker recesses of her mind somewhat, and Clarke forced herself to pay attention to the light footsteps of the newest entrant as they made their way into the room.

"Well?"

Lexa's voice. Sharp, cold, and far too distant - though not in the literal sense.

The pacing continued.

"The prince believes it to be some sort of viral hemorrhagic fever," Anya's voice spoke, sounding slightly hesitant for some reason.

"It is a sickness that our systems had become immune to over time, but the climate of Azgeda has given way to occasional outbreaks throughout the years... His mother has been...experimenting with weaponized strains of it for just as long, apparently. She claimed it would be...useful...in battle..."
Clarke didn't believe she'd ever heard Anya sound so uncomfortable before. It seemed almost unbefitting of the confident warrior she was widely-known to be. Her tone was reflective of near-cringing.

"'Useful in battle?" Lexa growled after a beat, barely-contained rage seething in her tone. "'Useful in battle?' Have I suffered some sort of gross oversight? Have I failed to check my own sovereignty? Do the streets of Polis now constitute a battlefield, all of a sudden?!"

Clarke understood Anya's reservations now.

If she'd been in enough control of her own body, she would've positively quaked in fear - and then probably hidden underneath the bed for good measure - at the tone of Lexa's voice. Never in her life had she heard such a menacing undercurrent coursing through the other girl's words. Had that kind of pure loathing been directed at her, personally, Clarke believed she would've collapsed at the Commander's feet and offered up her freedom, fully willing to submit to the girl's authority without protest for the rest of her days.

Anything to get that harsh current out of the girl's voice.

"Tell me, Anya," Lexa continued, voice rising with malignant passion as she spoke, "is this the Queen's way of declaring war on the Coalition? Does she wish me to bring the armies of the other eleven clans to her doorstep?!

The pacing stopped all of a sudden.

"DOES SHE WISH ME TO DELIVER HER SON'S HEAD TO THE FOOT OF HER BED IN A FILTHY SACK FOR HER OWN PERSONAL COLLECTION?!"

The cloth that had been wiping along her forehead stilled.

The sheer volume of Lexa's words was probably enough to halt the entire population of Polis in their tracks - enough to ring out for miles, even.

Clarke believed the entire world had to have stopped in that moment...
By the estimation of any random passerby, those words probably sounded as if they were rooted in blinding and all-encompassing fury - too much to have possibly been contained in one human being.

They probably believed that it was that same potential for rage that enabled Lexa to lead with such efficient ruthlessness - to be the only leader on this planet (and beyond) capable of maintaining a reputation as a true visionary while simultaneously ruling with an iron fist, so to speak.

In that moment, though, Clarke suddenly felt as if she'd discovered the true ingredients of the fuel that coaxed Lexa's steady-burning fire:

*Agony.*

Poignant, incomprehensible, and all-encompassing agony - that was what Clarke had heard in Lexa's voice just then.

The other girl probably hadn't meant to let it slip through the minuscule cracks in her steeled facade, but her apparently-elevated level of stress seemingly rendered her incapable of preventing it from doing so.

It was so rare that Lexa allowed others a glimpse of the emotions warring in the current beneath her skin, and this occasion seemed to be the most raw showing Clarke had been around to witness in her limited capacity.

She couldn't even fathom how it was possible for someone to sound so utterly and completely *broken*.

She was quite familiar with grief - that much was true - but this...

This was something else entirely - and it was fucking *painful*.

"*Leksa,* please..." Anya nearly whispered, sounding like an almost completely different person - a *gentle* person, at that. "Two weeks ago - and any other time before that, frankly - I would've been the *first* person to suggest uniting the clans against *Azgeda,* to cast them out of the Coalition for good and lay waste to their lands... In fact, you and I both know that I would've been at the very front of the entire army leading the charge, but..."

Clarke heard the click of a harsh and very audible swallow from somewhere in the otherwise-silent room.
"I-I urge you now to...to consider postponing any sort of...response until we can figure out Nia's motive for -"

"Her motive," Lexa cut her warrior off sharply, voice devoid of anything but a deadly sort of quiet, "is chaos. Her agenda is death... It is the same as always with her: testing the strength of my Coalition through recklessly childish exercises of authority. Trying to figure out the best way to undermine our sacred traditions so that she may have the chance to falsely Ascend in my stead..."

Clarke heard a very drawn-out sigh as she imagined Lexa slumping her shoulders at that, the steam rapidly leaving her body in a state of visible exhaustion. She pictured the entire scene beneath her closed eyelids, and she positively ached to reach out to the other girl to offer her some sort of comfort somehow.

"And you are absolutely correct in those assertions, Heda," Anya assured the other girl swiftly, sounding as if she was desperate to placate her Commander in any way possible. "Nia is as predictable in her idiocy as she is despicable... But, I believe this time is different. This time... I just - I don't know, Leksa. Something about this incident feels different - more calculated, somehow. I... I just don't know."

Even locked within the prison of her own body, Clarke could practically feel the tension in the silence that befell them for the following moments.

Though she'd been distracted by the intensity of the exchange currently unfolding just feet from her, Clarke now noticed that the heat she'd felt upon waking had gotten much closer to her all of a sudden.

It was getting a little too close for comfort...

"What do you suggest, then, fos?" Lexa asked finally, voice suddenly drained of every ounce of passion she'd previously spoken with - now replaced with a haunting level of bone-weariness.

"Do you suggest that I continue to allow Nia to wreak havoc on our people? To allow her to maim and kill whomever she pleases at every turn? To set deadly traps for anyone who happens to stand in her way whenever she gets some sort of sick burst of inspiration?"

The cloth resumed its movement across her forehead and down her cheeks, the hand that held it
noticeably trembling now as the Commander continued.

"I cannot say that giving her the benefit of the doubt registers as even remotely logical to me anymore, Onya. You must understand..."

"And I do, Heda - always," Anya responded immediately, sounding slightly breathless with her conviction. "I would never expect you to continue allowing her unthinkable behavior to go unpunished... However, in this case I-I would like to ask your permission to continue...questioning the prince, to collect every last bit of information he possibly has to offer on his mother's activities... I am sure there is plenty that he is withholding from us still, and - even though it is not typically something you allow - I believe I can get him to confess if I just -"

"Fine," Lexa cut her off quickly, tone cold and strangely dismissive all of a sudden. "Do what you must... Bring him to the very brink of death for all I care - I will not question your actions. Just...let me be for awhile, Onya... Beja."

"Yes, Heda, of course," Anya replied immediately, voice dripping with the incredible level of respect she had for her Commander. "I will report my findings to you immediately... And, Leksa -"

Anya choked, almost as if overwhelmed by the sudden need to get her point across.

"You must know... I-I would never question your decisions - especially when it comes to Azgeda and their queen. For your safety - for all of our safety - I simply wish to ensure that we are leaving no stone unturned at this point... I swear that you have my undying support in whatever you decide to do going forward - until my very last breath... I swear that to you, Heda."

A shuffling of movement - perhaps Lexa moving closer to her warrior.

"Mochof, Onya. I know... I truly do," Lexa nearly whispered, sounding every bit as exhausted as before but with a hint of reassurance now. "Your loyalty was never in question to begin with... But, please -"

"Right, of course, Heda," Anya conceded quickly.

The doors creaked open a moment later.
"I will not fail you, Leksa."

With that, Anya was gone.

A defeated sigh filled the air from where Clarke knew Lexa to be.

She wished with everything she had that her body would cooperate with her desire to call out to the other girl, but it remained an impenetrable cage upon the soft bed.

The heat was truly beginning to worry her jumbled mind in the still silence...

"How is she?" Lexa inquired softly after a moment, cutting through the quiet.

"She...remains mostly the same, Heda," Nyko's solemn voice answered from directly above her head. He was the one holding the cloth, apparently.

"Is she supposed to be so...still?" Lexa's voice came out more of a strangled rasp than Clarke was sure she intended it to be.

Nyko swallowed harshly above her.

"I'm not sure, Heda... I've never seen anything like this before. It is much more...potent than anything I'm familiar with..."

The uncertainty in his voice caused Clarke's already-racing heart to lurch uncomfortably in her chest.

Before she could spiral further, though, she felt the brush of a new set of fingers - noticeably calloused yet smooth beyond belief - down her right cheek, ghosting over her skin like the softest of feathers.
The feeling of those particular fingertips on her skin immediately calmed Clarke, and she was surprised her body had been able to contain the contented sigh that longed to be set free from the very core of her being.

"She's not...bleeding as much anymore, so do you - is it possible that she -?" The words seemed to die in Lexa's throat, stopping abruptly before she could help it.

She seemed to be afraid of what she might hear if she finished the question.

"The blood seemed to be the first symptom of the virus, from what I can discern," Nyko answered her, slipping into a tone of forced professionalism. "It was her body's way of expelling whatever airborne toxins found their way into her bloodstream after the initial exposure. I am...less concerned about the blood than I am the fever..."

As he trailed off, Clarke heard Lexa noisily gulp merely inches from her face. The girl's fingers caressed her skin still, as if in the hope of committing its texture to memory.

"Will she -?" Lexa choked, sounding every bit as agonized as Clarke felt being trapped within her own body. "Is she going to...?"

She didn't seem to be able to continue, voice scraped raw with the depth of her despair as she continued to stroke Clarke's face.

It was odd; Clarke had only ever heard that kind of despair at one other point in her life - when she'd found her mom slumped in the entryway of their quarters with a contraband bottle of whisky slipping from her grasp, tears carving a permanent trail down her cheeks as she almost-incoherently babbled on about the specs of blue in Jake Griffin's eyes. About how she couldn't believe her favorite part of him had now been immortalized in the eyes of the person they had created together - the person she could barely stand to look at anymore, as it seemed to legitimately torture her to do so...

How strange it was that this intimately torturous type of grief was now plain in Lexa's voice - as she spoke about Clarke, no less.

"I cannot be certain, Heda," Nyko replied after a moment, allowing a hint of sorrow to seep into his tone. "Whatever happens, it is beyond our control now..."
Clarke felt herself slipping back into the blackness as Lexa's hand moved a few stray strands of hair away from where it stuck to the side of her face with incredible gentleness.

She allowed her worry for the increasing heat against her bare skin to sink to the back of her mind as she lost consciousness once again, the sounds of Lexa's soft and comforting whispers lulling her into a sense of false calm in the far corners of her mind.

Clarke was on fire.

It was the only explanation for this special sort of hell that had snapped her back into reality all of a sudden.

The flames licked at every inch of her skin, burning right through her clothes as they made their way into her chest, coursing through her bloodstream with a white-hot intensity she'd never known before.

She could literally feel the skin separating from the sinews of muscle and the hardness of bone as the fire severed their connection. Every cell in her body seemed alert to the fact that her skin was now melting off, and it sent indescribably frantic pulses rattling through her mind, urging it to wake up - to do something.

Anything to put the flames out.

With every ounce of strength that remained in her dying frame, Clarke forced an agonized scream from the very depths of her soul to overpower the barricades that had kept her captive for far too long.

It ripped out of her chest like no sound ever had, and a pair of hands were instantly on her face,
firmly cupping her cheeks as she continued to pant around tortured whimpers.

"Clarke?!" Lexa called to her, sounding more panicked than the blonde had ever heard her. "Clarke, can you hear me? What's going on? What's wrong?!"

For the first time in what felt like days - and probably was -, Clarke forced her eyes open and blinked against the soft light in the clinic that burned her irises as if they were staring at the naked sun.

Upon first glance at her body, Clarke was utterly stunned to discover that she was not, in fact, on fire - at least not in the literal sense.

As she processed this startling discovery, her view became even more obscured by Lexa's beautiful face hovering just inches above her own. Terrified green eyes darted around Clarke's face wildly, searching for anything that could clue her in as to what was disturbing the blonde in such a way.

Upon seeing Clarke's eyes open, though, Lexa immediately locked onto the agonized blues with a flash of relief so powerful that it silenced Clarke for the briefest of seconds.

"Clarke," Lexa breathed, sounding every bit as relieved as her eyes showed her to be. She gripped the blonde's face as if it was her lifeline now.

"What's wrong?! What can I do?! Beja, Clarke, tell me what to do..."

Clarke was vaguely aware of the fact that her body was now being wracked with all-encompassing sobs as she continued to burn.

Nyko suddenly appeared in her left periphery, moving frantically as if searching for something.

"L Lexa," Clarke cried, voice painfully raw as the flames encompassed her throat. "M-Make it s-stop, please.. Please...make it stop!!"

Clarke had never seen the other girl appear so helpless before. Her grip on Clarke's face tightened to the point where it was nearly painful, her eyes watering as she looked down at the blonde in pure agony.
"Make what stop, Clarke?!" Lexa asked desperately, slightly breathless as the despair became clearly evident on her features once more, no hint of the mask in place. "What's going on? What's happening right now, Clarke?!

Nyko had removed some kind of metallic box from beneath the bed and was now hurriedly rummaging through it on the bedside table, face pinched in concentration.

"The flames, Lexa. The flames..." Clarke trailed off as the fire suddenly began to corrode the arteries around her heart, wrapping the belabored organ in its harrowing grasp.

Another raw scream tore from her throat as she began to thrash wildly on the bed, flailing her leaden legs every which way.

Anything to put the flames out.

Lexa immediately moved her hands from Clarke's face to lock the blonde's wrists into place on the bed to keep her from hurting herself.

"NYKO!!" Lexa shouted, struggling immensely against Clarke's writhing frame.

Her eyes were darting frantically between Clarke and the healer now, caught in a maelstrom of chaos she was powerless to fight against.

"DO SOMETHING!! NOW!!"

Had she not sounded so desperate, Clarke would've been impressed by the amount of authority the brunette was capable of lacing into her tone.

As it were, though, Clarke could barely register anything past the red haze in her brain as she began to whip her head from side-to-side on the bed, reduced to dreadful screams that scraped the inside of her throat like a sharp knife.
Lexa's hands tightened into steel cuffs around her wrists as she began to practically *plead* with the dying girl in her grasp:

"Ai Klark, ai skai prisa, beja... Don't give up. You can't give up on me... You are not *allowed* to give up on me right now. Do you hear me, Clarke?! You have to *keep fighting*..."

The tragic pleas gave way to a broken sob that seemed to rise unbidden from the inner depths of Lexa's very soul.

Clarke continued to thrash about as the flames consumed her, only vaguely aware of the drops of wetness that were falling to mix with her own tears now...

"*Please* don't leave me, *hodnes*..."

It was nothing more than an anguished whisper, but, for some reason, the emotion behind it shot straight through to Clarke's core like nothing ever had before.

*Hodnes*? She'd never heard such a word before... What did it mean?

Her quandaries were soon lost in the frenzy of her fevered mind as she felt the sting of what she believed to be a needle piercing her left thigh.

How strange - she'd never known Nyko to have access to that type of medicine before. Perhaps it was only used in the most desperate of situations...

The sting was gone in an instant, and Clarke immediately felt a sort of heaviness overpowering her urge to escape the flames.

Her head stilled on the pillow, lulling to the side as her eyes fluttered shut once more.

Lexa's hands released their iron grip on her wrists, moving to tangle in her hair once more.
The last thing Clarke registered was the feeling of Lexa burying her face into the crook of her neck as the girl's body shook with heart-wrenching sobs.

Clarke blinked her eyes open with a bit of a start, grimacing at the metallic taste of blood still lingering in her mouth.

With an absent glance around, she noted that she appeared to be alone in the darkened clinic at the moment.

The first thing she became aware of after that was just how heavy her body felt where it pressed into the soft bed beneath her.

She was shocked at how much like herself she was beginning to feel the more she emerged from the blackness, and she thanked her lucky stars that she'd managed to survive the worst of the virus somehow...

An unfamiliar addition of weight pressing into her torso caught her attention.
Clarke looked past her chest, momentarily stunned, to see Lexa's sleeping face turned towards her where it rested on her stomach. The brunette’s right arm was strewn haphazardly across Clarke’s waist, her left hand resting just in front of her face where she had their fingers intertwined.

So she wasn't alone, after all.

Despite herself, Clarke broke into a groggily brilliant smile as she allowed a very welcome sort of warmth to course through every part of her at the sight.

It was an unimaginable sort of warmth - the kind that curled beautifully in the depths of her stomach as it seemed to untether her body from where it desperately clung to this earth.

Never had she been so happy to float in such a way...

Slowly - and with the care of someone who knew they needed to be healing, for once - Clarke brought her still-bandaged left hand up to brush the hairs that obscured her view of the gorgeous girl away from her peaceful face. The girl looked so much more free this way.

At the first brush of Clarke's fingertips, though, Lexa stirred from sleep, rapidly blinking her eyes open as she startled away from the blonde as if having been struck.

As soon as green met blue, Lexa's face instantly soothed from its temporarily-alarmed state, and her right hand immediately came up to cup the side of Clarke's face, squeezing their entwined fingers even tighter together where they remained resting on the blonde's torso.

"Clarke?" Lexa whispered softly, hesitantly, scanning the girl's face with careful attention.

She looked at the blonde as if she almost couldn't believe what she was seeing - as if she was desperate not to have this vision ripped away from her now.

"Hey," Clarke replied simply, voice gravelly from having been scraped raw from her earlier screams.

She did her best to smirk up at the girl who was now staring at her in complete awe.
"Clarke," Lexa breathed, breaking into the most beautiful smile Clarke had ever seen as the emeralds began to pool.

The brunette immediately leaned down to rest their foreheads against each other, noticeably trembling now. She stroked the blonde's face as if she were afraid that if she ceased her movements for even one second, the girl would somehow vanish beneath her touch.

Clarke brought her left hand up to stroke Lexa's hair, doing her best to fight the tears that now stung the backs of her eyes.

If anyone were to walk in on them right now, they'd probably describe both girls as the very epitome of weakness in each other's grasp...

Lexa sniffled, trying to subtly hide the emotions that played so obviously on her face now where it rested against Clarke's.

"Are you alright? How do you feel? Do you need -?"

"Lexa, stop," Clarke cut her off, chuckling a little at the other girl's frantic questioning. "I'm alright. Really... It feels like the fever might've broken, actually."

And Clarke believed it truly had, as her mind was no longer jumbled in a feverish mess of half-consciousness, her limbs noticeably less heavy.

The fire seemed to have all-but-extinguished within her veins.

Lexa's breath shook as it danced at Clarke's lips, sending involuntary chills down the blonde's spine. No matter how hard she seemed to try, the brunette still couldn't manage to keep her body from trembling against Clarke.

"I will fetch Nyko for you," Lexa stated, straightening herself with what looked like incredible effort as she moved away from Clarke, attempting to steel her features beneath the mask.
Clarke only tightened her grip on Lexa's hand, willing the girl to stay with everything she had.

"Don't leave," she pleaded softly, blue eyes imploring as they bored into green.

Lexa swallowed harshly as she only just managed to school her features into stoicism for the first time in awhile.

"As you wish, Clarke," she replied softly after a moment, eyes burning with a quiet intensity as she gazed upon the blonde. "I'm sure he will return from his rounds shortly, anyways..."

The Commander turned her body more fully towards Clarke, maintaining a rigid set to her spine as her eyes refused to leave the blonde's face for even a second.

Clarke smiled a little playfully at the brunette before her.

"That was a close one, huh?" she joked, aiming to alleviate the tension with a bit of levity for a change.

Lexa ducked her head at the words, biting her lip against the apparent urge to smile as she shook her head a little.

"You know," Clarke continued, voice still incredibly harsh against her sore throat, "I'd have figured you would've learned by now..."

She pulled their intertwined hands up to her lips and pressed the ghost of a kiss to Lexa's knuckles, causing the girl's head to whip up at the touch.

The brunette's mouth dropped open in soft astonishment, seemingly at a loss for words as Clarke returned the favor that had left her so similarly speechless when Lexa had done it before.

"I'm far too stubborn to die, Lexa," Clarke confided, throwing a slightly cocky grin in the brunette's direction.

Lexa was frozen for a moment - still processing everything at the same time - before she broke into
an exuberant smile that gave way to a shakily relieved chuckle deep within her throat.

Clarke's breath hitched at the brightness of it, her heart speeding up a little as if the fever had suddenly re-emerged in her veins with full force.

Before she could stop herself, her next words seemed to spill from her lips as if by instinct:

"You have the most **beautiful** smile, Lex."

Her mouth snapped shut as soon as she spoke them, eyes widening as hot blush immediately colored her cheeks.

*What the hell was that?!*

Since when had she become such a hopeless - and **painfully obvious** - mess of feelings? Since when did she refer to the Commander of 12 Clans as "Lex?!"

For the love of all that was good and holy in this world, how had she gotten in so **unimaginably far** over her head?

Lexa, though... Lexa was the furthest thing from embarrassed, it seemed.

In fact, Clarke had never seen the other girl appear so **calm** before.

Not the kind of calm that could be attributed to stoicism of any sort, but the kind that spoke of one having found genuine peace - of one having found a **home** to settle in after such a long period of time.

The glorious emeralds revealed a soul that was practically **keening** with delight at having discovered such a thing - something far more powerful than the simple companionship it'd initially believed it had with the one swimming beneath the endless oceans. Something that surpassed the seemingly incomparable notion of equality it'd prepared itself to be content with forever.
Something like a *tether*...

Clarke almost couldn't handle the passion now scorching her skin in a very different way, and she darted her eyes towards the doors on the far side of the room for a moment, clearing her throat.

A change of subject suddenly seemed necessary.

"H-has there been any word from the Ark?" she stammered a bit awkwardly, praying that she didn't sound as weak as she currently felt. "Someone's w-watching the radio, right?"

Lexa, with that same passionate intensity burning beneath her eyes still, remained un-phased by the change of topic.

"No, I'm afraid there hasn't been. But, yes, I have had Indra guarding it in your room since you...fell ill," Lexa answered, clenching her jaw a little at the mention of Clarke's sickness.

Clarke simply squeezed the girl's hand a bit, seeking to reassure Lexa of her continued presence.

"How long have I been sick?" she asked, somewhat hesitantly now.

Lexa swallowed, schooling her features beneath her stoic mask once again.

"You've been in-and-out of consciousness for five days, Clarke," Lexa answered, voice strangely devoid of emotion.

Clarke's jaw fell open.

"*Five days?!*" she breathed in disbelief. "That can't be... I've gotta get to that radio -"

She made to sit up, but Lexa was immediately standing over her, holding Clarke down with both hands - having swiftly untangled their fingers - pressing firmly into the blonde's shoulders.
The Commander's expression was exceptionally stern.

"No, Clarke," she told the blonde, tone unquestionable. "You need to rest. Your body is still recovering, and I will not allow you to risk yourself further just so you can stare at that radio all night... You are not leaving this bed."

Clarke would've laughed at the amount of unnecessary authority in the other girl's voice now had she not been slightly...aroused all of a sudden...

Gulping against whatever strange response she was having to the Commander now, Clarke simply nodded, allowing Lexa to ease her back into a more comfortable position.

She attempted to steady her heartbeat as she stared up at the ceiling.

A random thought suddenly struck her.

"Lexa, what does hodnes mean?" Clarke inquired softly, tone alight with genuine curiosity. "I remember you calling me that when I was...having my fit - or whatever you wanna call it..."

She trailed off, turning her head to glance at the brunette with a raised eyebrow.

The Commander's expression was surprisingly guarded all of a sudden, and Clarke was slightly shocked to see how uncomfortable the other girl appeared to be now. Lexa shuffled in a somewhat uncharacteristically awkward manner as she laced her fingers together in her lap.

She lifted her chin a little, seemingly steeling herself in preparation to respond...

Right as she opened her mouth, though, the doors opened to reveal Nyko striding in with Anya at his heels.

The healer's eyes immediately found Clarke's, and the man smiled in elated relief as he looked upon her face. Anya's face also softened a bit at seeing the blonde awake and seemingly alright, but she
quickly schooled her expression as she strode over to Lexa, bending down to whisper something in the Commander's ear.

Lena noticeably stiffened at whatever the warrior was saying, and she nodded once as Anya leaned back to appraise her response.

The brunette rose from her chair suddenly, looking down at Clarke with barely-concealed regret beneath her mask.

"I'm afraid I must step away for a moment," she informed the blonde, tone forcefully neutral as her eyes never left the girl's face. "Nyko will take good care of you while I'm gone - won't you, healer?"

The Commander looked to the healer now, expression suddenly steeled with expectation as she eyed him.

"Of course, Heda," he responded politely, nodding curtly. "I will watch her."

Lexa nodded, seemingly satisfied with his response. She was working her jaw back-and-forth, appearing slightly troubled as she continued to stare down at the blonde.

After a moment, though, the Commander worked her shoulders further back and turned on her heels, following Anya as they swiftly exited the room.

Clarke tried not to dwell on the fact that Lexa had looked as if she'd had to physically force her feet to carry her from the room as she left...

She turned to meet Nyko's gaze on her after a moment.

"Rough few days, eh?" she quipped, throwing a wry smile at the man.

He shook his head in teasing disapproval, smiling a little in response.

"That is an understatement, skai prisa," he responded, tone somewhat exasperated. "Although your
system seemed to be strong enough to fight the strain that normally kills those who are vulnerable within a day, it was still...difficult to watch you endure...

Clarke reached out to place her left hand over his where it hung by his side, meeting his gaze with a much softer smile.

"Ye of little faith," she teased him quietly, watching as he seemed to relax just the slightest bit at her touch.

"Lincoln and Belou have been pestering me for days, asking if they can visit their beloved skai prisa... I will have to tell your many admirers that you are much better now," he informed her with a much wider answering smile of his own.

Clarke blushed a little, feeling slightly bashful all of a sudden - a bashfulness that was cut short by a yawn, no less.

Nyko's smile softened at the sight.

"Rest, now, Klark," he implored her quietly, reaching up to brush the hair from her face. "You will feel much better in the morning."

She nodded sleepily, already having closed her eyes against the exhaustion overtaking her once more.

Clarke fell into a peaceful slumber filled with green eyes and soft smiles.
Her room was empty, and she quickly searched for any sign of Indra as she made her way over to the radio.

She supposed she shouldn't be surprised, though; it was the middle of the night, after all.

Clarke had woken from her slumber much earlier than she'd expected, greeted by the glow of soft candlelight in the otherwise-empty clinic. She figured Nyko had retired for the night - as Lexa still appeared to be busy somewhere -, and she immediately decided to make good use of her lack of supervision, carefully sitting up in bed.

Though her head spun at first, she felt a lot more steady on her feet than she'd expected to, and she'd slowly made her way from the room as quietly as possible.

To her surprise, the guard posted outside of the door seemed to have drifted off to sleep, and Clarke had to suppress the urge to giggle as her bare feet padded towards the elevator.

She hadn't seen a single soul since emerging from the elevator - everyone seemingly asleep at the late hour -, and she found herself incredibly at peace at she stood at her window now, both hands supporting her weight as she gazed out over the vast city speckled with torchlight here and there.

The moon shone brilliantly from its perch in the night sky, and Clarke dreamily admired the plethora of stars that surrounded its bright orb in every direction.

She closed her eyes against the moonlight that bathed her in its calming beauty as she felt time begin to slip away from her...

The doors to her room suddenly burst open, smacking against the walls and startling Clarke from her peaceful revery.

She spun around on her heels to see a frantic Lexa barreling through them at a run, jolting to a stop a few feet inside the room.
Panicked green immediately locked onto Clarke's figure outlined in moonlight, and Lexa's entire frame seemed to breathe a sigh of relief as she bounded over to the blonde, grasping the girl by both shoulders.

"What are you doing up here, Clarke?!!" she asked, a current of fear coursing through her tone. "I thought I told you to stay in bed!!"

Clarke grimaced a little at the dismay in the other girl's voice, desperately searching for a way to placate her now.

"I just...I needed to check on the radio for myself," she responded quietly, flinching a little at how inadequate her words sounded. "I couldn't sleep anymore, so I just wandered up here... I'm feeling a lot better, Lexa. Really..."

Lexa's eyes were still probing her face with intensity, but her shoulders seemed to slump after a moment as she removed her hands from around Clarke's arms.

She turned away from the blonde, taking a couple of steps into the room as her left hand came up to cover her eyes, spine rigid as it only just managed to hold her up.

Clarke had never seen the girl appear so exhausted before...

"I'm okay - really and truly," she whispered reassuringly, doing her best to sound as convincing as possible.

She needed to figure out a way to bring the other girl out of the spiraling thoughts currently plaguing her - as if Lexa almost didn't believe that Clarke was truly alright, was truly alive in this moment.

Clarke smiled a little as she found the right words.

"Besides, I'd never go anywhere without teaching you how to waltz first. That would just be cruel, Lex," she quipped wryly, pulling out all the stops and aiming for that soft spot she knew Lexa had beneath her hardened exterior.
The other girl turned around at that, appraising Clarke with incomprehensible awe as they stood facing each other only a few feet apart.

Lexa's brows furrowed slightly as Clarke watched a thousand emotions flash through her emeralds.

"What are you doing to me?" she whispered - more to herself than to Clarke, it seemed.

Clarke tilted her head a little in confusion, struggling to understand Lexa's question.

The girl appeared extremely vulnerable in front of Clarke now, seemingly struggling against whatever was warring within her mind at the moment. Her posture was positively rigid.

The air was alight with a kind of electricity Clarke had never felt before, crackling between them almost as if it was trying to make itself visible to both of them somehow.

Building...

"You are going to absolutely ruin me, Clarke," Lexa stated with hauntingly steady conviction.

As if she'd finally accepted her fate somehow.

Building, crackling...

Magnets longed to join together - to re-discover their other half.

It was as if something snapped in that moment - a dam broke, the gates flew open, and the floor crumbled from beneath their feet, sending them hurtling towards the depths of an all-encompassing abyss...
Without warning, Lexa was suddenly surging forward until she very nearly collided with Clarke, lacing her fingers in blonde locks and crashing their lips together.
Even if it Breaks Me

Chapter Notes

Figured I'd give you a looong chapter before I jet off to Peru in two days (;
Don't worry - I'm planning on updating while I'm there. You won't have to wait four weeks lol.

Enjoy!!! (;

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Well, this was certainly not what Clarke had been expecting...

Her body was frozen in place, arms hanging stiffly at her sides as Lexa's frame pressed against hers, fingers tangling in Clarke's hair. Plump lips latched onto an agape bottom lip, and Clarke was only vaguely aware of the fact that she had yet to respond to the kiss - but how could she?

How is one supposed to respond when they're confronted with the startling reality that the one thing they'd been sure of throughout the entirety of their life had been proven so grossly false in one instant?

This was exactly what Clarke was experiencing in this infinite moment - the sensation of an existence built on a single fact now crumbling to a pile of ashes due to its having been so indubitably disproven...

If someone had asked Clarke to point to the location of the organ that kept the blood pumping incessantly through her veins, cycling it through and allowing her extremities to continue functioning, she would've immediately pointed to its immovable spot within her chest cavity. She might've even laughed in that person's face for having asked such a stupid question, assured in her own intellect to the point of startling overconfidence - especially considering how wrong she now
knew she was...

How had she not noticed it until this moment? With all of her esteemed medical knowledge, she couldn't possibly have managed to commit such a dangerous oversight, could she?

How had she not noticed that her heart was no longer beating from within her chest?

For, the moment that Lexa had crashed their lips together with a fiery passion so intense that it had legitimately paralyzed Clarke, she was immediately overwhelmed with the visceral sensation of having found something she'd never known she'd lost in the first place. Of having re-discovered her heart that had somehow managed to escape from its confines of flesh and bone to traverse the stars and endless forests, just so that it could rebuild itself in the image of brown hair and exquisite green eyes.

The realization had Clarke positively reeling, grasping at anything she could find that would provide some sort of an explanation as to how she'd managed to survive up until this point without the vital organ beating inside of her - how she'd survived such a lengthy separation from its life-giving force.

How it was possible that her heart had reshaped itself into another person.

Clarke suddenly found herself engulfed in a wave of sentiment so powerful that it moved her to action without a second thought.

Her right hand settled into the small of Lexa's back, grasping the fabric of the Commander's long coat in a trembling fist as her left hand came up to clasp onto the back of the other girl's neck, removing any lingering and unwanted space between them and pulling the girl impossibly closer.

Her lips molded to the indescribable softness of Lexa's, matching the other girl's raw passion with an awestruck tenderness Clarke had never felt for another human being before. She supposed she shouldn't have been surprised by it, though - it was her first time acquainting herself with her wandering heart, after all, an encounter that was sure to leave her in a state of raw vulnerability for many years to come.

At the first sign of Clarke's response to her, Lexa seemed to loose a full-bodied and all-encompassing sigh of relief that neither of them knew she'd been holding. She leaned further into Clarke almost imperceptibly, moving to trace her right thumb along the blonde's jawline as her fingertips continued to intertwine with the girl's tresses. Lexa's lips fit to Clarke's as if this was their only given purpose in
life, and the blonde suddenly became aware of a growing warmth in the pit of her stomach, coiling and flowing as if it sought to fill her entire being.

After an immeasurable beat, Lexa detached their lips - a move which had Clarke practically whimpering in displeasure - and turned her head, brushing their noses together as she re-captured the blonde's lips with a startling amount of urgency all of a sudden.

In response to Lexa's now fiery passion - and before Clarke could even process her own actions - she began to slide her hands down the length of Lexa's torso, silently memorizing every inch of the immaculate wonder in her grasp. Her hands slid around to the opening at the front of the long coat adorning the beauty, and she found herself slipping her hands beneath the fabric at Lexa's waist to grasp onto the girl's hips.

The moment Clarke's fingertips brushed along the exposed bare skin beneath the hem of Lexa's undershirt, it was as if the other girl was immediately reduced to putty in the blonde's hands - and she was all-too-happy to offer herself up to be molded in this moment. Lexa legitimately moaned into Clarke's mouth at the touch, spurring the blonde on with a newfound intensity as she pulled the brunette even closer to her, pressing their hips together in a manner that was the furthest thing from innocent.

As soon as their bodies connected in this new way, Lexa's entire frame began to tremble against Clarke's, her chest rising and falling at an alarming rate where it pushed into the blonde's ample breasts. Her hands untangled from Clarke's hair, and she slid them down the blonde's neck, over the top of her shoulders, and down her arms to right above the elbows where she gripped on for dear life.

Who would've thought that the Commander of 12 Clans - and a seasoned warrior, at that - would shake like a leaf in the wind when she kissed someone? Once again, Clarke supposed she shouldn't have been surprised - her heart could be such a delicate thing sometimes.

Although her mind had become hazy with a delicious sensory overload and the desire to explore this re-discovered piece of herself, Clarke suddenly became aware that the kiss was turning into something much...more.

As if by instinct, Clarke slid her tongue along Lexa's supple bottom lip, testing an uncrossed boundary and causing the other girl to whimper a bit as she enthusiastically granted the blonde access. Both explored this new territory with fervor, shifting their feet a little as they began an erotic dance with their tongues that had them positively enraptured in one another. Lexa slid her hands around Clarke's arms and down her back, lingering hungrily on every curve the blonde had to offer her as she worked her way down to the Clarke's hips.

The feel of expert hands exploring her body with such reverent appreciation caused Clarke to nearly ruin the rhythm of their dance as an embarrassingly needy moan ripped from her throat.
The air in the room suddenly seemed to dissolve in a vacuum at the sound, replaced by a suffocating heat that engulfed the two of them in scorching waves.

What had once been a passionately tender exploration of their missing pieces only moments before had now turned into a desperate attempt to make themselves whole once more - and Clarke was alarmed by just how carnal this attempt was.

With something close to a sultry growl rumbling deep within her chest, Lexa slid her hands around Clarke's backside and deftly hoisted the blonde into her arms. Clarke immediately wrapped her legs around the other girl's waist, locking on and grinding her hips down as Lexa gripped onto her ass in a manner that felt like possession.

Though she normally wouldn't entertain the notion of being anything other than fully autonomous, Clarke found that she wasn't even remotely opposed to being taken in such a way. It was only fitting that her heart reclaimed her after such a lengthy separation, after all.

Clarke's hands came up to tangle in Lexa's still-braided hair, and the brunette's grip tightened as she made a low sound of approval. The two girls were then consumed in a heated game of push-and-pull - all clashing tongues, biting lips and gasping breaths.

Before Clarke could even register what was happening, Lexa turned them around and hastened towards the bed, never allowing a single wisp of space between their bodies as they moved. She lowered Clarke gently onto the furs, bending over her and gliding her hands down Clarke's thighs and back up the blonde's body in a sensuous fashion as Clarke urged Lexa closer with her legs still wrapped around the girl's waist.

The manner in which Lexa's hands glided along the blonde's body felt like something close to worship, savoring every inch of the girl in her grasp with the zeal of one previously godless having remarkably discovered the creator of their universe. Her lips spoke of a potent desire so expertly hidden until this moment that it seemingly overtook every part of its owner now that it was given the chance to surface. Lexa had become a being of pure craving above her, and Clarke was more than happy to indulge.

Clarke found that Lexa had suddenly given her hips a paramount purpose as she began a lustful grind against the other girl, suddenly overpowered by a wanton need of her own. Lexa very nearly whined into Clarke's mouth as her hands continued their appreciative roving, rolling her hips down in perfect synchronization to meet Clarke's.
Everything about this felt like losing control - losing touch with a reality that had seemed so concrete in its limitations up until this moment. A reality that now fell at their feet as they continued to defy the limits of what was possible - of what two people were supposed to feel when their bodies were connected.

Clarke had never known that kissing could unravel her very existence in such a way, could recreate her in the image of one whose heart now seemed to possess her in all the ways that mattered in this life.

Lexa's lips detached from hers and began a titillating assault along her jawline and down her neck, licking and nipping hungrily at pliant flesh as Clarke was reduced to a writhing and whimpering mess beneath her. She was only vaguely aware of the coiling heat that had extended its tendrils to pool much lower now...

"Lexa," she breathed, the name a sacred prayer before it dissolved into a moan.

The sound of her name on Clarke's lips spurred the brunette on like nothing ever had, suddenly frantic as she moved her lips back up to join with Clarke's, unwilling to go without them for another second. Clarke responded enthusiastically, allowing their dance to pick up where it'd left off - savoring everything that was undeniably Lexa.

Her heart was pounding erratically in her chest as her lungs struggled for air, and she noted in the back of her mind that now was probably the worst time for her body to begin showing the effects of the sickness that had so viciously ripped through her only hours before.

She couldn't be bothered to care, though - she wouldn't miss a single second of this.

Clarke moved to drag her hands down Lexa's neck and over her shoulders, working her way towards the girl's flat stomach where she slid her fingers beneath the hem of Lexa's shirt, playing at the waistband of her tight pants...

Without warning, Lexa suddenly froze above her.

Her hands stilled where they had been kneading into Clarke's waist with gentle care, her lips immediately detaching from the blonde's swollen mouth.

Breaking through the lustful haze clouding her senses, Clarke slowly blinked her eyes open in confusion.
There was no sign of the green in Lexa's eyes that had been wholly consumed by the pupils currently blown wide in both. The other girl was legitimately panting as her body trembled above Clarke's, still entrapped in the blonde's legs.

A number of fierce and conflicting emotions flashed through the brunette's eyes as she moved her hands to the furs by Clarke's head to push herself to where she was hovering as far from the blonde as Clarke's legs would allow.

Clarke gripped onto the girl's waist and furrowed her brows, expression alight with alarmed confusion.

"Lexa?" she rasped, nearly-gasping for breath as her heart continued to race. "What's wrong? Did I - is something - ?"

At the blonde's quandaries, Lexa hung her head, forehead nearly brushing against Clarke's as she breathed out Shakily. Clarke's eyes darted across every visible inch of the girl's face, searching for the cause of Lexa's sudden disturbance. She brought her left hand up to stroke the brunette's hair with incredible gentleness.

Lexa was literally quaking where she hovered above Clarke now, seemingly fighting a brutal battle with every fiber of her being for whatever reason. Clarke had never seen the other girl appear so defeated before, and her blood began to thicken to ice within her veins at the sight.

With the difficulty of one trudging through immovable quicksand, Lexa straightened herself up to where she was standing against the side of the bed, Clarke's legs still locked around her person. Clarke immediately removed her legs from the girl, dropping them to either side of Lexa as she sat up in the bed, moving to brace her weight on both hands. She looked up at the brunette standing between her legs with something close to desperation.

Upon seeing the suddenly dejected look on the blonde's face, Lexa immediately closed her eyes, locking her jaw as she moved a trembling hand up to cover her eyes.

If Clarke didn't know any better, she would think that Lexa was suddenly on the verge of tears.

Finding that utterly unacceptable, Clarke moved her hands up to grip at Lexa's waist once again, silently imploring the girl to look at her, talk to her - do anything. Lexa went rigid beneath Clarke's touch, and the blonde suddenly felt like sobbing at her reaction.
What was worse, she could also physically see her heart shattering before her eyes.

"Lexa, please," Clarke begged, sounding incredibly shaky as she fought back tears. "Talk to me... What did I do? What - ?"

"You did absolutely nothing wrong, Clarke," Lexa cut her off immediately, tone firm yet far too aloof all of a sudden. Her hand stilled obscured her expression from discernment.

The stark contrast between the girl's tone and the intimacy of the moment they'd shared only moments before had Clarke practically gasping for breath. Her skin began to sting in every place Lexa had just been.

Lexa finally moved her hand from her face, allowing it to drop down to hang stiffly by her side.

To Clarke's utter dismay, the stoic mask was now firmly in place, preventing any and every emotion from slipping through its facade. Gone was her Lexa, replaced by the Commander now as impassive as ever. The only evidence of the moment they'd just shared was the swelling of Lexa's lips in a face framed by slightly disheveled hair, her blown pupils, and the quickened rise-and-fall of her chest.

The heartbreaking sight had tears threatening to overflow from Clarke's eyes.

"You...were sick, Clarke," Lexa nearly whispered, voice carefully devoid of emotions. "You were sick, and you need to rest... I must apologize for my lack of... restraint... I don't know what came over me, I -" 

The words seemed to die in her throat as she gulped them down, a pained expression now forcing its way to just beneath the surface of the mask.

"I don't understand...," Clarke rasped, shaking her head a little as her voice scraped harshly against her dry throat. "You - I... I don't -"

"You did nothing wrong... You must know that, Clarke," Lexa implored, a bit of quiet intensity tinging her tone now. "I just... I can't - I won't... I couldn't live with myself if -"

She lurched as if she suddenly had to choke back a sob, closing her eyes once more as she struggled with all her might to contain her emotions behind the mask. Swallowing thickly, she opened her eyes.
after a moment to reveal that quiet stoicism back in place - the thing that was tearing Clarke apart in this moment.

*What had gone wrong?*

"I will *never* endanger your life again, Clarke... I will protect you until my dying breath, even if that means -" Lexa grimaced, clearly struggling to force these words out of her mouth.

No... This isn't how it was supposed to go. What was she talking about? How was this endangering... Did Lexa believe that *she* was the danger? Why?

*Why?!*

The next words Lexa whispered clawed right at the exposed edges of Clarke's soul, rendering her nearly dizzy with pain:

"Even if it *breaks me.*"

With that, Lexa moved her shaking hands to gently pry Clarke's fingers from her waist and set them in the blonde's lap - who was currently stunned into a paralyzed silence.

This rejection hurt like nothing she'd ever felt before - and, *god,* was it agonizing...

*What did she do wrong?*

Lexa stumbled back a step, training her eyes on anything but Clarke was she turned on her heels and strode towards the door with empty purpose, moving as if she was a shell of the person she'd been only minutes before.

She opened Clarke's bedroom door and stopped, turning her head a little to throw a pained whisper over her shoulder:

"*Reshop, Klark.*"
Then, she was gone.

Leaving Clarke frozen in place on the bed, mouth slightly agape as she processed the fact that she'd just watched her heart turn her back on her, walking away in the moment she needed it the most - the moment she'd been stripped completely raw by the intensity of her vulnerability...

It was only much later that Clarke registered the fact that a steady stream of tears had been falling down her cheeks for quite awhile.

"Clarke? Clarke, can you hear me? Ark to Earth - come in, Clarke!!"

The sound of Bellamy's deep and gravelly voice calling to her in frantic and hushed tones from the radio roused Clarke from the most restless sleep of her life.

She jolted up in the bed, head spinning as she realized that she had passed out atop the furs after having cried herself to the edge of consciousness, the events of the night before slowly coming back to haunt her...

Morning sunlight streamed in from her window, and she shook her head against the swarm of emotions threatening to overtake her once more, forcing herself unsteadily to her feet as Bellamy continued to call to her.

As she stumbled groggily over to the radio, the sight of the bandages that had previously been around her fingers laying on the floor near the window caused her stomach to lurch uncomfortably. They must've fallen off when she and Lexa had -

No. She couldn't think about that right now. She needed to focus on something else. One foot in front of the other until...
Clarke reached down and picked up the radio receiver, holding down the talking button with shaking hands.

"Bellamy?" Her voice sounded far too rough for her liking, her mouth as dry as sandpaper. "I'm here, Bellamy... Where's my mom? Where's Raven?"

Silence crackled over the radio for far too long, causing Clarke's heart to thud unevenly as her grip on the radio tightened.

"Bellamy, are you there? What happened?!" A little panic was seeping into her tone now, and she forcibly cleared her throat to rid herself of the unwanted emotion.

"H-he's dead, Clarke," Bellamy finally rasped back to her, pain clearly evident in his voice. "Raven's boyfriend, Finn... He's dead. H-he was one of the prisoners they floated..."

Clarke clapped her right hand over her mouth at that, ignoring the soreness that was now evident in her weaker shoulder. She clenched her eyes shut against the familiar burning, doing her best to steady herself as pain tore through her.

*Her fault...*

"Oh god, Bellamy...," Clarke whispered, choking a little over the lump solidifying in her throat. "I can't believe... Raven must be -"

She couldn't finish that thought, having to suppress a sob from tearing out of her chest. She knew the pain of losing someone beloved, and the idea that Raven must be experiencing that same grief because of *her failure* nearly brought Clarke to her knees..

A terrifying thought suddenly struck her.

"Y-your sister? Octavia?" Clarke stammered desperately, gripping onto the radio for dear life. "Is she okay? Is she -?"
"She's fine, Clarke, she made it... She'll be okay for now." Bellamy sounded as if he was trying to convince himself of that just as much as Clarke - who breathed an immense sigh of relief at the news, a small consolation.

Thank god she didn't fail both of them...

"To be honest, I think she might actually be safer in prison at this point," he stated flatly, voice colored with hints of fear and anger all of a sudden.

Clarke furrowed her brows at that.

"What do you mean? What's happened?" she asked him quickly, tone rising a bit. "It's been five days, Bellamy..."

He sighed into the receiver, sounding the epitome of exhaustion now.

"I don't even know where to begin, Princess... I didn't think it would be possible for things to get any worse up here, but I'm continually proved wrong these days, it seems," he sighed into the radio once more, sounding a bit shaky as he continued.

"After Raven and I talked to you, we were heading to the clinic - to get your mom - when we got caught in the middle of the worst riot I've ever seen... More than half the Ark's population was crammed into the main dining hall, demanding that Jaha release the names of the prisoners he killed. Everyone was so violent, Clarke... I've never seen anything like it before..."

Bellamy trailed off to take another shaky breath before he continued in hushed tones.

"Because Jaha was hiding away like the coward that he is, Marcus Kane had to get in front of the crowd like some kind of martyr, talking out of his ass to try and calm the crowd down - but it wasn't working. He only made it worse, and they just kept pushing... So, he finally disappeared and came back with a call sheet, quieting everyone enough so that he could read out the names... God, you should've seen it, Princess... Every time he read out a name, someone in the crowd would either scream or collapse - or both - and it just got everybody even more riled up and aggressive... That's when he read out Finn's name."

Clarke gulped, feeling an ominous storm cloud blossoming above her head.
"Raven... S-she went absolutely insane, Clarke," Bellamy nearly whispered, sounding even more fearful now as he recollected the events to her. "Before I even had the chance to look at her, she was barreling towards Kane like a bullet in the dark. The crowd legitimately parted for her to pass through, and then she was at his throat like a fucking lion... That's when the guards finally decided to show up. One pulled Raven off of Kane before she did any real damage, but she fought the bastard all the way down - which got the rest of the crowd pretty fired up to join in..."

His voice was noticeably shaking now, and Clarke couldn't help it as her hand trembled where she held the radio.

"Then, the guards just...they just started killing people, Clarke. I don't even know how else to say it... They got their guns out and just started shooting."

Clarke sucked in a sharp breath, struggling against her constricting throat with immense difficulty. The room was spinning around her now.

"I barely even had time to think about it - I just knew I had to get to Raven and get us the hell out of there... I don't know how neither of us managed to get shot - I really don't - but we somehow made it out of there alive... Raven even nicked the list of names from Kane, which is how I knew that Octavia was alright... I ended up having to carry her to the hospital wing after that, though. She just couldn't stand any more..."

Clarke moved to cover her eyes with her free hand, collapsing in the nearest recliner with the radio still in her grasp. This was all too much...

"When I told your mom that we'd talked to you, she literally burst into tears midway through bandaging up a patient," Bellamy chuckled a little bit, finding a light in the storm of darkness. "After she calmed down a bit, she helped me get Raven to a table so that she could lie down while we talked. I told your mom everything you'd told us, and she hung on my every word like a prayer... I can tell she loves you a lot, Clarke - that's for sure."

Clarke smiled softly at that, closing her eyes against the tears and picturing her mother's face as vividly as she could manage. The image was blurring a little around the edges, though...

"She was just as shocked as we were when we told her about the people on the ground, but there wasn't enough time for her to ask questions... People were already trickling in from the riot, and the clinic was filling up by the second. There was just so much blood, I - "
Bellamy choked on his words, clearly struggling to continue assembling his thoughts coherently. Clarke felt a pang of sympathy for him, knowing how much all of this must be weighing on him - just as it now pressed down on her.

*Her fault...*

"Your mom said she'd come find me later, but that it was more important that I get Raven out of there - take her back to my quarters, give her some water, make sure she didn't do anything she'd regret... So, I did. Not two hours later, though, they put the entire Ark on full lockdown."

"*What?!*" Clarke rasped, speaking for the first time in awhile. "They *never* do that, Bellamy... Not unless -"

"Not unless they're planning on doing something pretty damn crazy - yeah, I know," Bellamy finished for her, sounding incredibly grim now. "And, they did... Jaha came over the loudspeakers like some kinda lofty fucking monarch and announced a new ‘correction system.’" The sneer in his voice was unmistakable.

"Long story short, they detained everyone in their quarters and started plucking the 'most aggressive' rioters from their rooms to be 'made an example of'. They've been floating at least five people a day, Clarke - over a live broadcast on every single screen, with Jaha pressing the goddamn button that ends it all for four days now... I'm actually surprised you didn't say anything about the bodies this time..."

Clarke felt the sudden urge to vomit the contents of her empty stomach all over the floor. *What the hell was going on?!* How could the Arkers let this happen? How could *she* have let this happen?!

*Her fault...*

Now was certainly not the time to mention the illness she'd contracted as an accidental casualty of biological warfare - that's for sure. Bellamy didn't need any reason not to trust the Grounders at this point...

"I-I didn't...see them... I've been...*busy* the past few days," Clarke stammered slowly, thankful that the statement wasn't a complete lie. "But, what about my mom? Have you seen her since the clinic? And Raven? How is she? Is she - ?"
"Woah, woah, woah - slow down there, Princess," Bellamy interrupted her, slipping into a somewhat placating tone - perhaps one he often used on his sister. "Take a breath... Raven's...not doing so well, but I wouldn't expect her to... She's been stuck in my quarters with me ever since the lockdown went into effect, but I haven't been able to get her to eat or drink much of anything. She just sits there and stares at the ceiling all day... I mean, she lost the only family she had, and I really don't know what I can do for her right now - besides just be here if she needs me... I just...I'm not really good with grief, Clarke. I...tend to react...badly..."

Clarke raked her hands down her face, fighting off the powerful urge to cradle her head in her hands and cry.

"But, no, I haven't seen your mom since that day... I did find a note - signed by your mom - under my door this morning, though. She must not be under lockdown like everyone else, considering how many patients she's probably having to stitch up at the moment..." he trailed off, tone suddenly hesitant for some reason.

Alarm bells sounded in Clarke's mind.

"What note, Bellamy? What did it say?" she pressed, blood beginning to rush in her ears.

"Just three words: 'the Chancellor's Hatch.'"

Clarke's heart nearly stopped at that. Her blood ran cold, her breath quickening to near gasps as the room spun dangerously around her now.

It couldn't be...

"Bellamy, do you - ?" Clarke choked, struggling all of a sudden with the blackness dancing around the edges of her vision. "D-do you have a-any...idea what that means?"

Silence crackled over the radio for the first time in awhile, and Clarke was only just managing to hold onto her last shreds of sanity as it dragged on.

"Bellamy!!"
"Yeah, Clarke, I do," he answered finally, voice oddly flat.

Her grip was like a vice on the receiver now.

"And what are you going to do?!" Her voice was rising with panic, miserably failing at concealing her emotions.

Another excruciating silence befell them, and Clarke felt like screaming at the boy. Then, finally:

"What I have to, Princess."

With that, the radio went dead.

Clarke was frozen in place for immeasurable moments, mouth agape as she continued to hold onto the radio.

This couldn't be happening...

"Bellamy! Bellamy!!" she shouted into the radio after a beat, mustering all of her strength to fight through her stunned paralysis. "Answer the goddamn radio right now! Don't you dare leave me like this!! BELLAMY!!"

After waiting for far longer than she should have staring at the receiver in her trembling hands, Clarke finally slammed the stupid thing down onto the table and shot up from the chair. She began to pace back-and-forth, raking her hands across her face and through her matted hair as her blood continued to pound in her veins, her head swimming uncomfortably.

This couldn't be happening... If what Clarke was thinking turned out to be correct, Bellamy was almost certainly going to get himself killed - along with Raven and her mom, as well.

This couldn't be happening...

After carving a miserable trail in the floor for what seemed like hours, Clarke's legs finally gave out
on her, and she collapsed in a heap on the floor.

It was all just *too much*...

Curling in on herself and covering her face with her hands, Clarke began to rock back-and-forth as she succumbed to gut wrenching, full-bodied sobs.

It had been eight days since she'd last heard from Bellamy.

*Eight fucking days.*

With every passing hour, Clarke could feel her sanity wearing thinner and withering away - and she wasn't sure it would be possible to repair the damages done at this point.

She'd sat there and cried on her floor for hours, only getting up when she realized how much pain the position was causing her. As if on autopilot, she'd then made her way to the bathroom to bathe and clean up, pulling on a fresh pair of pants and a tunic to continue going about her day.

When she'd re-emerged from the bathroom, however, Indra had been standing in her room waiting for her, the backpack she'd been given for her journey to Earth in the woman's right hand. The warrior handed the bag over to a shocked Clarke, swiftly explaining that the supplies were hers to do
as she pleased with and that she'd been given the day off. With that, Indra turned on her heels and left Clarke gaping after her.

The task of removing the various supplies from the bag and placing them on the bookshelf below her beloved record player was beyond menial, but at least it gave her something to do.

Anything was better than wallowing in her anxious misery...

The next morning, she'd reported to the clinic bright and early for her usual rounds with Nyko. Upon her arrival, though, the healer had quietly taken her aside and informed her that she'd been reassigned for the time being.

Apparently, the Commander believed it would be a much more prudent use of Clarke's time to break away from Nyko and go off on her own to attend to the various children of Polis who needed check-ups. Clarke could barely keep her jaw from falling to the floor as he'd told her, mind reeling as she realized that this must be Lexa's first official act of "protection" for her, as ridiculously unnecessary as it seemed to be. Keeping her out of the "line of fire," so to speak, to attend to a bunch of harmless kids...

She'd followed Nyko to the house of the first child in a daze, and the healer swiftly left her to attend to the sickly little boy by herself without so much as a word.

So, that was what she'd become over the past few days - a makeshift pediatrician to the children of Polis who made random house-calls to whomever required her assistance.

Though she was glad for the distraction, the fact that Lexa had decided to craft this specialized job description for her baffled Clarke beyond belief. Did she really believe Clarke to be in that much danger from sick patients?

Though she knew it was incredibly wrong of her, she hadn't yet informed the Commander of her conversation with Bellamy, still attempting to process everything he'd told her in her own mind and silently praying that she'd actually dreamt the harrowing encounter. Besides, she didn't think she was ready to face the girl who'd previously left her in such a way, claiming that everything she did - and would continue to do - was for Clarke's protection, whatever the hell that meant... Clarke had turned every scenario over and over again in her head, trying her best to understand the situation from Lexa's perspective. Try as she may, though, every reason she could come up with either left her feeling exceptionally small with the level of her own inadequacy or left her positively aching for the girl who couldn't allow her heart to be torn apart once more.
Had Clarke had her wits about her during the throws of passion, she might've told Lexa to hell with protection - she'd never been much of a self-preservationist, anyways. But, alas, she hadn't managed to force the words out quickly enough...

The silver lining in her grim situation was the fact that Belou had taken to following her around like a shadow as of late, accompanying her to every house and softening the children to Clarke's presence - which ultimately made her job ten times easier.

She'd also begun carrying the radio around in her emptied backpack, keeping it with her at all times in case of word from Bellamy or anyone else. In addition to the radio, she kept the hunting knife, first-aid kit, her sketchbook, and pencils in the pack - and Belou would often flip through the pages of her drawings while she worked, making occasional appreciative noises and pointing out his favorites to her as he went.

After her day's work, she and Belou would join Lincoln, Nyko, and Zenya - who was quickly warming up to Clarke, to the blonde's never-ending surprise - for dinner in the main dining hall of the tower (taking the place of her evenings with Lexa), and the five of them would usually sit around for hours trading stories and reveling in each other's company. The time spent with them lightened the weight on Clarke's chest just the slightest bit, but she couldn't quite shake the constant sense of uneasiness that constricted her throat and lungs like a vice whenever she stopped and took a moment to think.

She also couldn't seem to quell the intense longing she felt for a certain green-eyed, overly-stubborn and protective Commander who avoided her presence at every turn...

Clarke had managed to catch a glimpse of the Commander merely twice over the past eight days - once turning a corner in the tower and another from a distance in the marketplace of Polis, both times with Anya, Gustus, Indra and Titus hot at her heels -, and both times sent her heart plummeting and her stomach churning at just how impossibly beautiful Lexa was. Despite everything - and despite the lingering sting of rejection Clarke felt across every inch of her skin -, she couldn't muster a single ounce of anger or resentment whatsoever towards the girl who'd stolen her heart and locked it away in a cage with her own. She could only feel sorrow - sorrow and an ache in her chest like she'd never known before, far worse than the constricting burden the Ark's tragic fate had placed on her.

A small consolation was the fact that Belou and Zenya would typically accompany her back to her room at night, begging her to play a song from the magical record-player the two were so incredibly enamored with. After the three of them had danced and laughed until they could barely breath, Belou would pull Clarke by the hand over to the bookshelf, pick out a random book, and make the blonde read to him in Gonasleng while sandwiched between himself and Zenya on the bed.

The siblings were wanderers - having been orphaned many years ago by the only family they had - and Clarke found immense comfort in the similarities their lives now seemed to share. With all that had been said and done, it only made sense that they'd struck such a close-knit bond in so little time, really.
Allowing themselves to bask in the warmth of this new bond, the three would usually drift off to sleep in a pile on Clarke's bed, worn out from the strangely domestic routine they'd forged as of late.

(Little did Clarke know that Lexa would often find a number of excuses to pass by the blonde's bedroom at night, quietly listening to the sound of music and laughter while pressed against the outside of the door - until she would return much later in the night to remove the book from Clarke's lap and place a tender kiss to her forehead.)

On the eighth day, Clarke and Belou were making their way back to the tower for dinner after having bandaged the leg of a feisty young girl who'd fallen out of a tree when a pale-faced man - not much older than Clarke, she reckoned - suddenly appeared in their path. He was all tangled black hair, chiseled jawline and frantic blue eyes as he came to an abrupt stop in front of Clarke.

"Please," he breathed, bending to place both hands on his knees as he struggled to catch his breath. "You...have to...help m-my daughter..."

Clarke furrowed her brows as she stepped forward to place a comforting hand on his shoulder. His level panic was exceptionally unsettling to her.

"What's wrong? Where is she?" she inquired softly, doing her best to sound as steady as possible.

He straightened, meeting her eyes with tears pooling in his - the most striking and bizarrely deep shade of sapphire she'd ever seen.

"Follow me," he rasped, taking off down a side street to their right in a flash.
Clarke and Belou shared a bewildered glance before sprinting after the man in hot pursuit.

They weaved through side streets and alleyways at an alarming pace, Clarke slightly struggling to keep up as her leg began to throb, making their way to the less-populated outskirts of Polis. After what felt like hours of running, the man finally stopped in front of a small cottage surrounded by growing crops and a stable. The boundary wall stood sturdy and tall a few yards beyond the house, the less-used eastern entrance of the city off to the left a little ways.

The man gestured for them to follow him into the house, and Clarke immediately whipped the backpack off her shoulders as she made her way over the threshold with Belou close behind, unzipping it to get the first-aid kit ready.

The inside of the one-room cottage was comfortable enough - though slightly barren -, a small kitchen area to the right of the entrance with a wooden dining table adjacent to a beaten old couch that sat in the middle of the room. In the far left corner of the cottage was a large four-poster bed with a singular occupant lying atop strewn sheets.

Clarke instructed Belou to wait by the door as the man led her over to the bed.

At a closer glance, Clarke noted that the little girl couldn't be more than four years old, her skin a rich caramel much darker than her father's ivory complexion. She wore a ragged navy dress, her long dark hair framing her head like a halo. She had her father's gorgeous bone structure, and Clarke was momentarily struck by the exotic beauty of the child.

The man knelt down beside his little girl and began cooing to her Trigedasleng, turning to Clarke with widened eyes when she remained unresponsive. It was only then that Clarke observed just how labored the girl's breathing was, the pale cast of her skin alarming as she could barely manage to keep her little eyelids open.

Clarke approached the bed, throwing the backpack down and placing her hand on the girl's forehead, doing a once-over of her vitals before turning to the man.

"When did this start?" she asked him, in full-on medical mode now.

She noticed the tears beginning to fall freely down his face.
"W-we were... During dinner... She just...she fell out of her chair, and I -," he shook his head, unable to finish as his expression turned heart-wrenchingly desperate. "Please, healer... She's all I have.."

His voice trailed off into a choked sob, and he pressed his fist to his mouth to stop the sound. Clarke's heart truly ached for him in that moment.

She focused on the little girl once more, taking note of her racing pulse and labored breathing. If she'd fallen out of her chair during dinner...

Suddenly, it hit her. The girl was suffocating.

"Help me get her to her feet," she commanded the man quickly. He looked at her in utter confusion for a moment before jumping to action, lifting his daughter gently into his arms and handing her off to Clarke.

"Watch what I'm doing and remember it," she instructed the man calmly, who nodded immediately in response.

Once she had the girl securely in her arms, Clarke pressed her front into the girl's back and placed one fist above the child's navel, the side of it facing her abdomen. She then began to put firm pressure on the girl's stomach in even successions.

On the fifth pump, the girl heaved up a large bite of meat that went flying a few feet in front of them. Clarke stopped her pumping and began to gently pat the girl on the back as she continued to cough and catch her breath.

The moment she calmed down, the girl turned her head up to cast a bashful smile in Clarke's direction, who returned the gesture in kind. The blonde was startled that the girl's eyes held the same stunning sapphires as her father's.

Before Clarke even had a chance to process anything else, though, the man had moved to swoop his daughter into his arms and hugged her tightly to his chest, clenching his eyes shut as sounds of relief and joy overwhelmed him. He met Clarke's gaze with reverent awe.

"Thank you, healer," he whispered passionately, clutching his daughter closer to him. "I don't know how to... Just, thank you..."

Clarke smiled softly at him.
"Just remember what I did for future reference, alright? It's a very common thing that happens with kids - and people, in general, really... Oh! And, maybe, tell me your names?" she requested with a raised brow. He nodded immediately, a wide grin breaking out on his face.

He set his daughter back down and she immediately ran to Belou. The two of them took off out of the cottage together, and the man watched after his daughter with obvious fondness written on his features.

"My name is Jax, and my daughter is Isabella - named after her mother... Isa, for short," he told Clarke, walking over to the kitchen area. "Can I offer you anything to eat or drink, healer?"

"No, thank you," she shook her head, smiling politely as he gestured for her to take a seat on the couch. She complied graciously. "I'm Clarke, by the way... If you don't mind my asking, how do you know Gonasleng so well?"

Jax walked back to sit beside her with a clay mug in his right hand, and he brushed his unruly hair out of his face before casting a crooked grin in Clarke's direction.

His clothes were simple: a collared white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows and baggy beige pants that hung loosely off his waist. His feet were bare - and incredibly dirty.

"I haven't always been a farmer, Clarke," he confided, quirking an eyebrow at her. "Before the time of Isa's birth - four summers ago now -, I was a member on the front lines of Azgeda's army."

Clarke's jaw dropped open at that, and she immediately scanned his face for signs of a lie as he continued to gaze steadily back at her. It was only then that she noticed the scars and markings along his defined cheekbones and temples that distinguished the Ice Nation's warriors. She shifted back on the couch a little, and he seemed to notice her newfound wariness, as he smiled much more gently at her, an ancient sadness playing at the edges.

"You have nothing to fear from me, Clarke... I rejected my clan's ways many years ago."

Clarke nodded slowly, still not entirely convinced.

"And...why would you do that, exactly?" she asked him cautiously, attempting to gauge his reaction to the question.
Jax sighed, shifting back to sprawl lazily on the beaten sofa. He looked at her with a bit of a smirk on his face.

"Well, how long do you have?" he inquired, smile quirking a little crookedly as he looked at her.

At her shrug, he simply nodded.

The sounds of Belou and Isa laughing and squealing wafted into the cottage, and Jax smiled a little at the sound. It soon faded into a delicate frown, though, and Clarke noticed his sudden change in demeanor with intense interest.

"You see, when I was but ten summers old, I met the love of my life, Isabella, at the peak of Azgeda's worst winter in history... She was a beacon in the darkness and I was but a hopeless traveler longing to find the light," he smiled that same sad smile, and Clarke was immediately struck by the poeticism of his words. "The moment I saw her, I knew I was done for... I followed her like a star-struck fool, knowing full-well that I would follow her to the ends of the Earth if she asked me to... She was just so perfect, Clarke, and the day she told me my feelings were returned, I... Well, I very nearly died in her arms..."

He trailed off into a melancholy chuckle, shaking his head a little as he was captured by his memories.

Clarke found him utterly intriguing, to say the least. He contradicted everything she'd ever heard about the Ice Nation's warriors - from his gentle demeanor to the bitterness with which he regarded his clan of origin. He was somewhat of an enigma to Clarke...

She leaned forward in earnest as he continued.

"I asked her to be bonded to me during our sixteenth summer, and we ran off to complete the ceremony on the outskirts of our lands... Though we knew our haiplana frowned upon such unions, we continued to live in a quiet sort of bliss for two more wonderful summers, more than happy to create a small reality of our own. Our clan is...barbaric - something straight out of the most repugnant abysses of hell, to say the least, a poison to us all -, and the nature of the traditions in which we were raised sought to undo the very fabric of everything we'd built together..." Jax sighed, raking his hand through his hair once more as his shoulders hunched a little. He jaw was locked as he attempted to school the emotions from his face all of a sudden.

"That was when we found out that Isabella was with child," he told her, voice shaking a little as he closed his eyes against the memory. "It was supposed to be a joyous time - a time to celebrate a new
life entering its cycle - but, instead, we found ourselves agonizing over what to do next... Nia is ruthless, merciless, and cruel, and she consistently chose to put our people at risk by defying every single Heda that ever came into power. Under her rule, our child would've been damned - damned to a life filled with violence and brutality so gruesome that even the fiercest of warriors often cower at its grim prospects... The majority of our people only follow her out of fear, Clarke - fear of what might happen should they attempt to retaliate against her regime... It was not an easy decision to make, but we both knew it had to be done..."

He hesitated, clenching his jaw even harder as he opened his eyes to meet Clarke's once more.

"With only the shirts on our backs and the hope in our hearts, we defected from Azgeda and came to Polis as refugees, begging for our Heda's mercy and protection... It was a measure to be taken only in the most extreme of circumstances - and often refused by generations of leaders past -, but we'd heard that Heda Leksa was a much more...generous ruler than her predecessors had been, seemingly motivated by a much grander vision of peace... So, we chanced it, gambling our lives on the potential mercy of a newly-Ascended leader... And, as it turns out, our bet was well-placed."

He smiled genuinely at Clarke now, eyes softening slightly as he spoke of his Commander.

"In exchange for our sworn fealty and a public rejection of Nia's sovereignty, Heda provided us safe haven in Polis. We received a month's worth of rations and were provided temporary housing in the central sector of the city - as well as given a consultation with her best healer for our unborn child... It was an unprecedented act of kindness by a leader of her caliber, and word of her generosity spread like wildfire throughout the clans... We owed her so much more than our lives could ever measure..."

Jax trailed off once more, brows furrowing all of a sudden as the soft brightness vanished from his expression, replaced by a visceral sort of tragedy. He shifted his gaze to the floor.

"We were doing so well, thriving as a family in the culture of the capitol and truly happy for the first time in our lives, when - " he choked, gulping harshly against the obvious lump in his throat. He continued in a near-whisper, voice trembling with anguish.

"Isabella went into labor in the middle of the night...and I...I couldn't...get her to...to the h-healer fast enough, and she - " he choked once more, struggling with everything he had to force these last words out:

"Her soul...left her body the moment Isa's was given life."
Clarke closed her eyes, feeling the overwhelming urge to cry as her heart quite literally shattered for Jax and his lost love. She placed a shaking hand on his slumped shoulder, and his gaze remained downtrodden as his body trembled beneath her touch.

"She was...my heart, my soul - my life... Otaim." The despair was plainly evident in his voice as he continued. "I...I...wanted it to be over... I wanted to end my suffering after just eighteen summers of life - to join my soul amongst the clouds once more - but I could not... Because, the moment I looked into my little girl's face, I saw her... I saw Isabella... She has my eyes, it's true, but the rest of her is the part of myself I thought I'd lost for good - the better part... Isa is the reason I greet the sun with a smile in the mornings, and everything I do for the rest of my time in this life will be for her..."

Jax was meeting Clarke's gaze with the most fiercely protective and adoring expression she'd ever seen, and she knew he was thinking of his daughter now. Clarke was amazed by the depths of his words, by the way in which he seemed to paint the picture of his life through the lens of an artist - one who'd found his inspiration through love, and had been wholly grateful to be re-invigorated through its purest form after believing it to be lost for good.

The way he spoke of his wife Isabella, the way he'd referred to her as his heart and soul... She found it registered powerfully within her, for some reason. Perhaps, it had something to do with the recent revelation of the whereabouts of her own heart...

It surprised her out of her revery when Jax took one of her hands in his own after a moment.

"What you did just then - saving my Isa, my heart... I can never repay you," he whispered, regarding the blonde with intensity burning through every inch of his features. "But, that does not mean I won't spend the rest of my life trying to do just that... Know that you have my gratitude forever, Clarke... Truly."

He squeezed her hand a little as if to emphasize his point, and she found herself answering him with a teary-eyed smile of her own.

"That...won't be necessary, Jax... Really... I did very little, just -," she hesitated, suddenly remembering the words that Lincoln had told her not so long ago - words that had brought her such peace when he'd spoken them:

"Just...live. You and Isa... Be free, be happy, and just live."

Jax seemed stunned for a moment, mouth slightly agape as he processed her words. Then, after a beat, he finally nodded his head with vigor - so enthusiastically, in fact, that his black hair flopped
messily into his eyes and he had to blow it away with a gust of air from the corner of his mouth. Clarke chuckled at the comical gesture, overwhelmed by a blossoming warmth in her chest for the man and his daughter.

Suddenly, Isa's alarmed shout cut through the quiet air:

"NONTU!!"

Before Clarke could even think, Jax was up and out of the house in a flash to get to his daughter.

She immediately leapt off the couch and ran after him, bursting out of the cottage and onto the dirt pathway. Jax had Isa in his arms as he stood beside Belou, all three with their heads upturned to the evening sky.

_Not again..._

Following their gaze, she craned her neck upwards, watching the scene unfold with her jaw on the ground.

Hurtling towards the Earth at an alarming pace, ringed in fire, was a gleaming pod that was a good bit larger than the one she'd come down in - and in much more pristine condition, as well. She watched as a parachute burst from its hull, slowing the trajectory as it landed a few miles off in the distance - right near the edge of the lake.

Her heart pounded as she watched the landing from afar, immediately deducing the origin of the metallic contraption:

The Chancellor's Hatch.

The legendary fail-safe provided by the makers of the Ark intended to ensure that the precious leader of the surviving members of the human race had a way out if things got... _messy_. The pod she'd heard her father whispering heatedly to her mother about so many years ago - the forbidden knowledge stemming from his lofty position as one of the principle engineers on the spaceship. The one piece of the Ark that had never been confirmed as to ever having existed on any schematics available to the general public...
And Bellamy had fucking *hijacked it.*

With electricity now buzzing through every inch of her frame, Clarke ran to the three Grounders still gawking up at the sky and pulled the eldest by the shoulder, causing him to whirl around with Isa still in his arms as she addressed him:

"Jax, I'm gonna need to borrow a horse."

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Chapter End Notes

...I realize y'all might hate me with all these cliffhangers, but I really can't help it with the nature of the plot at this point. Soz.

Also, if any of you have read The Infernal Devices (prequel trilogy to the Mortal Instruments), I pictured Jax as Will Herondale's doppelganger - with his same penchant for waxing poetic. Cuz why not, right? (;

I also wanted to explore Azgeda from more sympathetic eyes, building the world and providing Clarke a starkly different perspective - while simultaneously humanizing and warning. Jax will continue to be important to the plot, so I hope you liked his introduction!

Lots happened in this chapter, so feel free to let me know your thoughts below...(;
Once again, Clarke was struck by how much she hated riding horses.

Though it was necessary in her current situation, she wished with everything she had that she could just teleport to the damn lake.

Warm evening sunlight broke through the endless canopy all around her, and she barreled towards her destination at an alarming pace.

Jax had given her his fastest mare, and Clarke had taken off on its back with nothing but the clothes on her person and the pounding in her veins. Belou had tried to accompany her, but she was thankful when Jax placed a halting hand on his shoulder and kept him from coming after her. She'd then raced out of the eastern entrance to the city without so much as a glance back, and she could only hope that she'd reach the lake before nightfall.

Her exact destination was unclear, though, and she was forced to rely on an instinctual sense of direction that was (hopefully) guiding her further east towards the site of the Hatch landing. The sun
was setting behind her, so she figured that had to be a pretty good indicator that the path she now
taveled was the correct one.

Clarke held both reigns in her hands and clung onto the leather saddle like her life depended on it -
which it actually did - and allowed the huge beast to race towards their target with very little direction
given on her part. Hopefully, she'd be able to keep them on the right path with only the slightest of
twitches to the reigns.

As they hastened onward, Clarke found herself cycling a series of questions through her mind at a
panicked speed:

How did Bellamy manage to find the hatch? How did he launch the thing once he'd gotten there? Who
did he bring with him? What state did he leave the Ark in? Where was her mother - and had she been
the one to suggest that he take it in the first place? Why would she?

Was Bellamy even the one in the pod?!

That last thought brought her up short all of a sudden.

What if Bellamy wasn't the one who'd stolen the Hatch and taken it down? She'd just automatically
assumed... What if she was barreling towards a group of hostile Arkers out for blood with nothing
but the shirt on her back and a horse she could barely hope to control beneath her body?

Despite these latest reservations, Clarke knew couldn't turn back now. She needed answers,
regardless of what it might cost her to get them...

As the sky continued to darken through the breaks in the canopy above her, Clarke began to tremble
in anxious anticipation of what she might find upon her arrival to the crash site. In addition to the
endless stream of questions already circling her mind, she had to wonder: did they even survive the
landing? What if a demolished pod with a pile of scattered corpses was the only thing she found?

Oh, god... Clarke couldn't let herself dwell on that possibility for another second. She had to just
keep moving...

After what felt like hours of galloping over fallen branches and weaving through the vast stretch of
forest in a hopeful direction, Clarke finally caught sight of a tree line far off in the distance - with a
large body of water glistening in the last remaining beams of light. The unmistakable gleam of the
reflective metal of the Hatch across the lake caused Clarke's heart to lurch sharply in her chest, and
sweat began to run down her face in excess.

Breaking through the tree line and onto the rocky shore leading to the lake, Clarke directed the horse around the circular expanse of the water, catching sight of a boy a little older than her carrying an unconscious girl in his arms from the relatively-undamaged Hatch.

She peeled her eyes away from them to guide the horse to a stop near one of the trees a few yards away from the site, feeling the need to keep it nearby in case of emergency.

She dismounted clumsily, barely managing to catch herself before she fell flat on her rump. Taking a deep breath to steady herself, she clenched and unclenched her hands into fists and began a hurried walk towards the figures emerging from the pod.

As she got closer, she noted the broad set of the boy's shoulders as he carried the unconscious girl, his dark hair slicked back from his tan and freckled face as he sported the formal uniform of a guard.

*He must be Bellamy,* she thought to herself.

The girl in his arms was wearing a deep crimson jacket and dark pants, her black hair pulled back into a ponytail as it swung behind her head that hung loosely over Bellamy's arm. Raven, perhaps?

He was holding her bridal-style, and Clarke was immediately concerned as to what had happened to render her unconscious in such a way. Bellamy caught sight of Clarke's approaching form and widened his eyes as confusion, alarm, fear and finally relief settled in them as he seemed to deduce who she was. He nodded once in greeting, stepping out of the entrance of the pod to move a little more towards the water with who Clarke presumed to be Raven still cradled in his arms.

Clarke was brought out of her thoughts as another girl stepped out of the pod, slightly younger with long brown hair that fell straight down her back. Her eyes were wide as she took in the scene around them, her arms crossed in front of her as if to keep herself in tact. She wore a similar uniform to the one Clarke had come down in, her face oddly familiar though not resembling anyone she knew in the slightest - which meant she must be...

But, *how*?! She'd been in lock-up!! Bellamy had *told* Clarke that she'd been in lock-up!! How had he...?

Her thoughts were cut brutally short as a fourth person emerged from the pod, all hesitance and caution as he took in his surroundings. He also wore the uniform of a guard, which was the exact opposite of what she'd been expecting.

Time stopped. The blood ran cold in her veins, her vision beginning to redder around the edges as
she stopped dead in her tracks, fingernails biting into the palms of her hands as her eyes bored into his frame like a beam of deadly fury...

Wells.

His eyes immediately widened in alarm as he locked onto her figure, his mouth falling open as he seemed to be paralyzed by the sight of her.

Before she could even process her own thoughts and actions, Clarke felt herself sprinting towards him like an uncaged - and *feral* - animal coming face-to-face with its captor after being tortured relentlessly for years...

"You son of a BITCH!!" she roared, slamming into his chest with the full force of her weight. Wells grunted as they tumbled to the ground together next to the pod, and he barely had time to flinch before fists began to rain down on him.

Clarke couldn't think. She could only *act*.

Her entire being had been consumed in a wave of hatred so powerful she felt like it might legitimately cause her very core to burst into searing flames.

Everything that had ever gone wrong in her life - from her father's murder to the chaos now befalling the Ark - was *his fault*. Everything bad that had happened...it was because of *him*. Because he dared to *exist*. Because he had to...

Because she needed someone to blame. Because she needed someone to take the pain away somehow - to relieve her of the guilt that constricted her soul like a vice and kept her in a constant state of miserable unrest these days. As Lexa had so aptly pointed out to her not long ago, the sins of the guilty often weighed the heaviest on those who'd willingly extend their arms to catch the burden they were so grossly unprepared to carry - simply by the nature of their innocence.

Who better to blame, then, than the soul whose slate was truly just as blank as hers?

Besides, all she could see now was *red*...

She was straddling Wells's chest, slamming her fists down onto his face in ruthless succession,
whipping his head from side-to-side as blood began to flow from his nose and fly from his mouth. Her entire torso throbbed with the amount of sheer force she was putting into the punches, but she really couldn't be bothered to care.

Let her knuckles shatter, for god's sake. It would simply be a small part of her penitence for allowing her soul to succumb to such blackness.

Despite his arms being splayed out beside him and fully capable of use, Wells made no move to protect himself, accepting her savagery with an eerily quiet calm. His eyes were unseeing as he stared past her into the darkening sky, allowing Clarke to bring him closer and closer to the brink of death without so much as a sound...

"Clarke, stop!!" Bellamy yelled desperately from somewhere over her shoulder. "You're killing him, Clarke!! STOP!!"

Clarke was only vaguely aware of the fact that she was trembling and shouting out far too loudly with every punch to Wells's face, reduced to uncontrollable sobs as she continued to beat her only friend to within an inch of his life. If she didn't stop soon -

Suddenly, arms were wrapping around her waist and pulling her off of him as she continued to punch blindly into the air and kick her feet, loosing shrill screams of protest. The person holding her - obviously smaller than Bellamy in every physical way - was clearly struggling with the amount of resistance the blonde was putting up, and Clarke began to kick and scream like an absolute lunatic as she was pulled backwards. The person suddenly came to a stop, squeezing Clarke's waist with all of their might and forcing the air out of the blonde's lungs.

At this point, Clarke didn't care if she suffocated to death... She just needed... She needed... relief.

"Bell... I can't...hold her...much longer...," an unfamiliar female voice grunted in her ear, breathing heavily and gripping onto Clarke with all of her might.

"The lake, O!!" Bellamy called in response, sounding frantic as Clarke continued to struggle against who she now confirmed to be his sister, Octavia.

Without another word, Octavia legitimately dragged her sideways across the rocks, carrying the rabid blonde towards the water. With an outcry of grave difficulty, the girl threw Clarke into the icy lake with everything she had.
The sensation was instantly sobering.

She was paralyzed by the cold, allowing her body to sink further and further into the depths of the clear water as still as her breathing now. The shock of the temperature would’ve normally been enough to spurn her into desperate action to escape its sharp claws, but this time...

This time Clarke accepted the agony without protest. She and Wells had this in common, it seemed - they were both more than happy to offer their souls up to the chopping block, fully willing to accept the sacrifice with a morbid kind of earnest.

As she sank deeper into the freezing abyss, Clarke found a strange sort of comfort in this torturous sort of baptism she was allowing herself to undergo. Perhaps this shock to her system would reach far enough into her being that it would surround her soul in its unforgiving grasp, forcing it to rid itself of any and every toxin that currently riddled it sickly. The blood-letting hadn't been enough - this had to reach deeper...

Before she could really allow this forceful method to take effect, though, hands were suddenly gripping her arms and dragging her from the water. Octavia had her beneath the armpits, pulling her limp body onto the shoreline and flopping her down onto her back like a lifeless doll.

Clarke could only feel numbness now.

The sky stretched above them in every direction, a dusting of stars splattered across its length like flecks of glitter shaken from god's paintbrush. Glorious mountains stood tall and immovable only a few miles from the lake, and Clarke suddenly wished that she could be standing on her tiptoes atop the peak of the tallest one, stretching her hand up to swipe her fingertips across the heavenly canvas. She might even be able to greet the ancient souls of the past from up that high- maybe even seek the wisdom of those who'd made much harder decisions than she'd ever have to make...

As she continue to stare blankly up at the night sky, one aching arm sprawled haphazardly beside her and as the other fell across her stomach, water lapping at the bottom of her shoes, Clarke became aware of someone sinking down onto the rocks to her left. The person moved to bend their legs up so that they could cradle them against their chest and clasp their arms tightly around both.

"He helped us, you know," the voice of who Clarke knew to be Octavia spoke quietly, voice surprisingly soothing. "Wells, I mean... Bellamy wouldn't have been able to break me out without him... I know it's not my place to say, but- "
Octavia cleared her throat, all hesitance and a lack of self-esteem all of a sudden.

"He's not the monster you think he is," she whispered, voice dancing around Clarke's ears but never quite sinking into her skull.

What was she talking about?

Before she could ask, another much larger person flopped down onto the rocks to her right. Clarke turned her head to watch Bellamy adjusting Raven into a half-sitting position on his lap, arms wrapped protectively around her torso. His gaze was distant as he stared across the water.

"Octavia's right," he told her quietly, deep voice laced with exhaustion and exasperation. "He's the only reason we got out of there alive..."

He trailed off, glancing down at Clarke who had turned her head slowly back up to stare emotionlessly at the endless sky. Upon Clarke's lack of response, Bellamy simply sighed in her periphery, ducking his head a little to rest it on Raven's left shoulder almost on impulse, the girl's head lulling to the side on his right one. Octavia continued to stare straight ahead of her to the left, and Clarke absently wondered if Wells was still sprawled where she'd left him...

"After I spoke to you, I headed back to my quarters from the control room. I'd only been able to get out of there in the first place because I was on the guard, but I still had to follow the curfew - just like everyone else..." Bellamy sounded even more distant than his eyes made him seem. "When I got back, Wells was sitting at my kitchen table with a stack of blueprints spread out in front of him... Raven was asleep at the time, so I guess that's the only reason why she didn't kill him on the spot - hence why she's currently conked out on a fair amount of sedatives courtesy of your mother... I guess she figured that Raven probably wouldn't be too happy with herself if she became a cold-blooded murderer before she even got to Earth..."

Bellamy shook his head a little, the smallest hints of a crooked smile breaking out across his face as he continued.

"Wells claimed that your mom had slipped him the same note - the one about the Chancellor's Hatch -, and that he immediately knew what to do... His father kept a lot of the Ark's classified paper files in a safe in his closet- an incredibly stupid move, if you ask me -, and Wells had been able to find the key when he ransacked their place a while back... Long story short, he made me promise that if he helped me get to the Hatch without getting my sorry ass floated, then I'd take him with me to the
Bellamy sighed once more, and Clarke glanced over to see his eyes closed where the side of his head rested against Raven's hair. He just looked so tired.

"Seeing as I had no other option, I accepted on one condition: he had to help me break Octavia out of the Sky Box... He agreed, and we spent the next several days planning everything out to a 't'... We'd usually go to his place, seeing as Jaha was too busy floating people all day long to come home, and Raven would've legitimately ripped Wells's throat out if she saw him in mine... Don't know if she would've done as much damage as you did, though, if I'm being honest..."

He cast a sideways glance at Clarke laying on the ground, and she simply closed her eyes, feeling the first hints of agony and guilt beginning to poke at the edges of the numbness. That, and the chill of her wet clothes that clung to every inch of her, causing her teeth to chatter noticeably as she continued to lie still.

Octavia shifted a little uncomfortably to her left, silent as ever.

"After we'd mapped the best route to take in order to get to the Hatch, I stole a low-grade guard's uniform to give to Wells so that we could slip into the prison hold without suspicion. I'd already memorized her cell location from the call sheet Raven took, and it was actually surprisingly easy to get in and get out without being noticed... As it turns out, it takes a lot of manpower away from lock-up to carry out daily murder exercises."

He snorted humorlessly, and Octavia shuffled stiffly on the rocks once again.

"We'd already arranged to meet your mom on the way back from breaking Octavia out, and she was there at our designated spot to give us a shit ton of sedatives and a first aid kit - coupla bottles of water, too... She, uh -" Bellamy cleared his throat, and Clarke imagined him rubbing the back of his neck in a little awkwardness.

"She wouldn't come with us, Clarke. We tried, we really did, but she said she wouldn't leave your people to suffer like that without someone to patch them up... I'm...really sorry, Princess..."

It didn't surprise Clarke in the slightest that her mother would do such a thing - and she'd already deduced as much -, but the confirmation still knocked the wind out of her like a punch to the gut.
"Wells let me go in and knock Raven out once we got back to my quarters, and then the four of us made like thieves in the night and sprinted to the Hatch... It was deep in the southern sector of the Ark, and we were afraid we'd gone to the wrong place for a few moments there... No wonder no one could ever find the damn thing when they looked... It took us days of grueling over those stupid schematics to find the launch site, to begin with, and then there was the process of setting a long enough timer so that we could get in the pod before it auto-deployed - which was truly a bitch, Clarke, but we somehow managed to do it... Lord only knows how we made it this far. Luck be damned - this was nothing short of divine intervention..."

Bellamy trailed off, and Clarke opened her eyes to glance at the face of the boy who seemed to have aged years in a matter of hours. His eyes were closed now.

"But, I mean, here we are, right? That's gotta count for something...," he chuckled a little, sounding slightly pained. "It's...beautiful, Clarke... Ten times better than any old movie they ever showed us up there."

Clarke found herself chuckling a little despite herself, breaking her profound silence for the first time since her outburst. Bellamy's eyes snapped open at the sound, and he glanced down at her with something close to relief. She figured he was probably happy to find out that she hadn't completely lost her mind back there...

"I could definitely sleep out here - right in this spot, actually," Octavia stated suddenly, speaking for the first time in quite awhile. "Anywhere's better than that damn death-trap in the sky..."

Bellamy grunted a sound of agreement, and the three of them fell into a heavy silence for immeasurable moments.

Slowly but surely, Clarke used her abdominal muscles to pull herself up off of the rocks, sitting up with her legs splayed out in front of her. Without a word, she dragged herself to her feet and stumbled over to where Wells remained on his back a few yards behind them, leaving Octavia and Bellamy staring after her in apprehension from over their shoulders.

As Bellamy had recounted their harrowing escape tale, Clarke decided that she needed to ask Wells a single question, for some reason...Something about his easy acceptance of her cruel punishment for him had given her pause - almost as if he was fulfilling his ultimate intended purpose from the start... There was something off about all of this, something that wasn't being said - something that was being kept from her. It could only be one thing...
He's not the monster you think he is, Clarke...

While the answer to this one question might ruin her for the rest of her days, she'd determined that continuing on in this way - under the guise of a much easier lie - would be far worse than drowning beneath the crushing waves of the truth.

She collapsed down beside the boy who was staring emptily up at the sky, face swelled to almost-beyond recognition, blood dripping from nearly every inch of his face. Seeing him like this, seeing what she'd done to him...

Clarke was suddenly thankful for the increasing throb of her bloodied knuckles.

"It wasn't you, was it?" she asked him flatly, voice sounding as dead as she felt inside. She was full-on trembling now, and she couldn't tell if it was from the press of her freezing clothes against her skin or the first signs of a panic attack.

Wells was silent, refusing to meet her gaze as she stared at the bloody carnage she'd created on his features. She knew full-well that he understood the context of her question, and she simply waited.

Time and space warped around them, wrapping them both in a vacuum that consumed every fiber of their beings.

After a beat, he responded in a surprisingly clear voice:

"Does it really matter now?"

With that, Clarke felt as if everything she'd ever held in her grasp had slipped away, the rug ripped out from under her as her soul writhed in agony. It was as sudden a sensation as it was powerful...

It could only have been one other person, then.

No...god, no. She couldn't - this couldn't...No.
"I knew you wouldn't... I knew how much it would hurt you if you knew...," Wells trailed off, struggling to find the right words as he wheezed against the strain of his sufficient injuries. "Sometimes, it's easier to destroy your own life with a lie than to start the fire that'll burn everyone you love with the truth... You and I both know it's easier to shoulder the burden by yourself than to be the one who places it on someone else..."

Clarke stared down at his marred face with lifeless eyes, feeling suddenly as if she, too, bore the gashes of one having had their face torn into by ruthless fists. Wells reached a weak arm out to clasp onto her hand, staring into her eyes with a tragic level of understanding.

"If it's any consolation, at least you know you're not the only one trying to atone for the sins of a parent here..."

The smirk he attempted morphed into a grimace as he looked up at her, and Clarke felt hot tears running down her tortured face as she met his gaze.

*What had she done?*

"Wells, I - " she choked, voice thick with despair that clawed at her throat like the serrated edge of a knife. "I'm so sorry... I - "

"Clarke, don't," he cut her off, squeezing her damaged hand a little. She flinched at the pain it caused, but she didn't attempt to remove her hand from within his.

"I know you... And I know you're gonna want to take the blame for this one - hell, you'll probably try and take the blame for every bad thing that ever happens in your lifetime, if we're being honest here... But, this one isn't on you, alright? Even this."

He gestured to his face with his free hand, giving her a comfortingly knowing look.

"You want my forgiveness? Fine. You have it. End of discussion... Got it?" He raised his eyebrows at her, clearly waiting for a response.

Clarke nodded after a beat, if only to momentarily appease him. He knew her too well, though, and he closed his eyes as he huffed a heavy sigh. After a few deep breaths, he opened them again to reveal eyes that positively *burned* with the depths of his sincerity - though slightly ringed with
exhaustion as they were.

"Okay, how about this: since both of us know full-well that my dad won't get a single ounce of the punishment he deserves, we'll consider my...injuries...to be taken on his behalf, yeah? And your knuckles - "

Wells brought Clarke's split and bloodied hands up for closer examination.

"Will be for your mom... Do we have a deal here, Griffin?" The casually light tone of his voice contrasting with the heavy proposal he was making struck Clarke in the strangest way...

She burst into a fit of hysterical laughter, bending forward slightly to brace her damaged hand on her thighs as the sound tore through her. Wells broke into a wide grin in response, succumbing to shaky chuckles of his own as he watched Clarke absolutely lose it.

Without even realizing it, Clarke found herself curled sideways into the fetal position facing Wells a couple feet from his sprawled body, laughing so hard that tears were now streaming down her face. Or, wait... Was she still laughing?

No... No, now she was crying... Sobbing, actually... What a strange roller coaster she found herself on all of a sudden...

"Clarke!! Clarke, someone's coming!!" Bellamy's shout sounded somewhere behind her by the lake.

Before she even had the chance to process anything, Bellamy was standing in front of her in a defensive position, reaching for something on his belt...

"Shit! My gun, i-it's gone... How could that have happened?! I -"

Octavia was suddenly crouched beside Clarke, propping a still-unconscious Raven up against her front as her brother stood in front of them all. Clarke curled further in on herself, longing to become small enough so as to not be seen...

She heard the sound of horses' hooves clomping to a stop a few yards off, multiple pairs of feet
dismounting in firm crunches on the rocks.

A moment of tense silence. Then:

"Clarke? Clarke!!"

Lexa.

The metallic slide of swords being unsheathed.

"What did you do to her?!" Lexa roared, voice filled with incomprehensible fury.

It only made Clarke sob harder.

Octavia shifted uncomfortably next to her, and Bellamy took a slight step back, adjusting his footing with uncertainty noticeably trembling in his spine now.

"Heda, please...," Clarke heard the unmistakable voice of Anya mutter, seemingly doing her best to placate the clearly on-edge Commander.

The amount of tension crackling in the air was causing Clarke's head to swim (or maybe it was due to the lack of oxygen from all her crying).

She needed to do something...

"L-Lexa," she called weakly, struggling through the tightness in her throat. "I'm a-alright... I-I'm okay... Bellamy - "

She turned over to lie flat on her back, confronted by the sight of Bellamy's backside, his body obscuring her from viewing that she really wanted to see - who she wanted to see...
"Help me up, will you?" she rasped up to him, voice much too gravelly for her liking. It'd taken every ounce of her strength to cease her tears for the time-being.

Clarke noticed the boy's fingers twitching a little at his sides, clearly uncertain of whether or not he actually wanted to do as she'd asked.

"Bellamy, come on... They're supposed to help us, right? Don't ruin this by being an idiot...," Octavia spoke up from beside Clarke, surprising both the blonde and her brother.

Bellamy chanced a disbelieving look over his shoulder, all clenched jaw and pursed lips, before finally relenting after a moment.

He swiftly turned around and bent to grab Clarke beneath the shoulders, hoisting her to her feet in one easy movement. She nodded once to him, placing a calming hand on his shoulder before moving to stand beside him to face the newest arrivals.

Oh, shit...

Standing a good few yards directly in front of them was a rigid and fuming Lexa - in full-uniform though thankfully devoid of war paint -, flanked on either side by Anya, Indra, and Gustus a few paces behind her.

As soon as the brunette caught sight of Clarke, her frame softened a little as her eyes roved the blonde's body, searching for any signs of injury. Upon noticing Clarke's ruined hands, Lexa's eyes widened slightly before steeling beneath her cold mask, knuckles whitening where they gripped her sword.

The sight of the girl standing before her after what seemed like ages of obvious avoidances and missed opportunities brought the rejection back full-force, and it hurt Clarke enough to focus her on the task at hand.

She carefully clasped her hands behind her back, flinching only slightly when the movement sent a white-hot pain up both arms. Taking after the master of stoicism now visibly struggling to follow her own rules, Clarke schooled her expression into an emotionless calm, tilting her chin up and rolling her shoulders back ever-so-slightly.

"I apologize for not informing you of their impending arrival, Commander," she began, tone incredibly formal as she kept her emotions from spilling through. "But, truth be told, I wasn't clued in on their plans until a little less than half an hour ago now... Regardless, you made a promise to grant
them sanctuary in Polis upon their arrival here. Will you remain true to your word?"

Lexa had managed to school her expression completely from discernment, the only sign of her lingering fury the rigid set of her spine and the tightness of her grip on the sword handle. Her jaw did begin to work back-and-forth as Clarke spoke. Lexa's eyes didn't stray from the blonde even once.

Knowing Lexa as she did by now, though, Clarke knew that the girl was only just managing to contain her emotions in this moment...

Finally, after a ridiculously lengthy silence, Lexa seemed to decide:

"Though I am incredibly...displeased by your lack of warning in this situation, I will uphold the promises I made to you, Clarke of the Sky People... You all will be safe in the capitol," the Commander informed them, tone laced with every bit of authority her position demanded. The double meaning in her words as she spoke of keeping said promises was not lost on Clarke, either...

Clarke's shoulders deflated a little, slumping in obvious relief as Bellamy noticeably relaxed beside her, as well.

"Thank you, Commander," Clarke told the girl, allowing her own mask to slip a little as she poured an incredible amount of sincerity into a single flash of her eyes.

Lexa seemed to catch it, nodding once as she accepted the blonde's thanks.

"Due to the nature of your...arrival, though, I believe it will be best for all of us to return to the city and rest for the night. We will discuss the proceedings from here-on-out in the morning once you are all fully-rested... Is this understood?" the Commander inquired, tone unquestionable enough to answer for them.

Clarke nodded immediately, and she noticed Bellamy doing the same - though slightly more reluctantly than she would've liked. She understood his reservations at this point, though - Lexa had come on pretty strong, to say the least. Based on her growing track record, it would seem that the brunette had a penchant for memorable first impressions...

Seemingly satisfied with their agreement, Lexa began to fire orders over her shoulder at her readily-waiting warriors, all of whom nodded immediately in compliance.
Indra mounted her horse and trotted a little away from the group to scan the tree line for unwanted visitors while Anya and Gustus approached the five adolescents with caution.

"My warriors will assist the injured in any way possible. You need not be afraid of them," Lexa stated as the two continued towards them.

Gustus bent to examine Wells who simply stared back at the warrior in fascination before the larger man hoisted the injured boy into his arms with little effort, making his way back to his horse without a word. Anya moved to stand near Octavia who gripped Raven a little closer to her. Bellamy angled himself between the warrior and his sister, hands twitching uncomfortably by his sides once again while his brows furrowed in unease.

"Bellamy, let her help," Clarke imbued him softly. She'd been watching the scene with a small amount of uneasiness of her own. "She won't hurt them... I promise."

Closing his eyes briefly and breathing out shakily, Bellamy simply nodded after a moment and stepped aside, allowing a passive Anya to bend and lift Raven into her arms. Octavia scrambled to her feet immediately after that, looking as if she wanted to follow the warrior now heading back to her horse.

"Clarke, may I have a word with you?" Lexa inquired softly, surprising Clarke as she was somehow much closer than she'd previously been.

Clarke whirled around to see the girl a mere few feet from her now, hands clasped behind her back, expression as calmly stoic as ever. Clarke gulped a little bit but nodded after a beat, making to follow Lexa who was now walking slowly towards the tree line beside them. It would never cease to amaze Clarke at just how silently Lexa seemed to glide over every surface, moving as gracefully as one consistently in their best element.

The two of them made their way a few yards inside of the tree line, Clarke trailing a bit behind the Commander, going just far enough that they were obscured from view along the shore line before they stopped.

Lexa's back was turned to Clarke, spine incredibly rigid as her arms now moved to dangle stiffly at her sides.

A heavy silence befell them for far too long...
"Why didn't you tell me?" Lexa whispered finally, sounding almost vulnerable as she concealed her face from view.

Clarke's mouth fell open a little, slightly thrown by the question. If Clarke didn't know any better, she would think that the vulnerability in the girl's voice stemmed from something close to hurt...

"I...you didn't - " Clarke snapped her mouth shut, struggling to find the right words to answer such a question. Lexa's back remained turned to her.

She closed her eyes for a moment, knowing full-well she was about to lay herself bare on the chopping block once again.

"You've been avoiding me for days, Lexa... What was I supposed to do?" Clarke's voice was an impassioned whisper as she struggled to keep it low enough to avoid any eavesdropping ears.

Here goes nothing...

"You just left me there, Lexa... I would've given you...everything...everything I had to give - right then...a-and you just left..." Clarke swallowed against the lump forming in her throat, unable to keep her voice from quivering miserably.

Lexus's hands were clenched into fists at her sides now.

"I just...I just want to know why... Why'd you walk away like that, Lexa?" The level of desperation in her tone was almost pathetic. "And don't give me any of that bullshit about protecting me, either... I'll have you know that I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself, thank you very much."

"I know you are, Clarke," Lexa responded immediately, voice slightly shaky yet firm as she still refused to face the blonde. "You are stronger than anyone gives you credit for, and I would never doubt you in such a way... And I cannot even begin to tell you how...hard this has been for me, or how sorry I am that I...I just - " Lexa seemed to choke on her words all of a sudden.

"You almost died -" she noticeably blanched on the word, "because of me.. Because you happened to be standing too close to me... What happens when - if - ?"
She didn't seem to be capable of finishing her train of thought, and Clarke immediately knew what she had to do.

Stomaching all of the rising panic at the thought of putting herself out in such a way - an open target for every flying knife - Clarke closed the distance between them and wrapped her arms around Lexa's waist, pressing her front firmly to the girl's back.

Lexa's breathing seemed to stop abruptly at the touch, clearly not expecting this response as every inch of her went into rigid paralysis.

"I know, Lexa... I get it, okay? It's...terrifying to think about what could happen to -," Clarke gulped, choking off her strained whisper as she rested her chin on the girl's right shoulder. She didn't need to go there right now...

She could literally feel her heart tearing itself to shreds.

"But, we can't live in fear of what could happen... That's just the nature of being alive: we accept the fact that we can die at literally any moment, and there's nothing we can do about it except try and make peace with ourselves before it happens. That's life, Lexa... Putting yourself or others in a glass box doesn't keep you - or them - alive, it just keeps your heart beating and your lungs contracting until they finally don't anymore. That's it..."

"I'd rather have you here and breathing than dead with only pleasant memories to exist in your place," Lexa replied immediately, voice quiet and noticeably trembling - as if she was suddenly being haunted by said memories.

Clarke squeezed her eyes shut, feeling a much sharper pain in her chest overpowering the throbbing in her hands.

"But, why, Lexa?!" she questioned emphatically, voice an impassioned whisper. "Isn't that...I mean, that's what life is, though, right? Just a series of moments in sequence? A bunch of good memories we can reflect on when it gets too painful to make new ones - the best of times frozen forever in our minds to get us through the worst of them? Isn't that - ?"

"You can't touch a memory, Clarke!!" Lexa cut her off suddenly, carefully removing Clarke's hands from her waist and stepping forward to spin around on her heels to face the startled blonde.
Tear tracks had carved a trail down her cheeks, and her green eyes were aflame with a despair so viscerally raw that it literally took Clarke's breath away. Her chest was *heaving* as she attempted to calm herself. The soul within the emerald windows was writhing in pure *agony*, slamming itself against every wall of its cage and clawing at its very core to *make it stop*...

*A heart in pieces.*

"You can't *hold* a memory... You can't *confide* in a memory, and that memory *won't* be there to comfort you when no one else can... Because, that's just it - it's a *memory*, Clarke!! A moment that began and ended with the same breath...A moment that is *gone forever*..."

Lexa's voice trailed off into a heart-wrenching sob, and she moved to muffle the sound with trembling hands as she shook with silent despair.

Clarke was speechless.

*Of course...* How could she have been so blind? Lexa was *hurting* - constantly aching over the loss of her love, the only person who had ever truly seen her as just *Lexa*.

That kind of loss... It creates a never-ending cycle of pain for the one experiencing it: pain that stems from what *could be*, along with pain from what actually *is* and has *been*. Neither are mutually exclusive, either; both kinds of pain feed off of each other, weighing on one's shoulders like the proverbial angels and devils of the human conscience, feverishly urging you to jump while simultaneously providing you with every possible reason to stay. *Damned if you do, damned if you don't*...

The expectation of pain, alone, is enough to break one's heart for good.

Loosing a heavy sigh that contained every last ounce of her protective resistance, Clarke stepped forward and delicately removed Lexa's hand from her face, shielding slender fingers in her own battered and broken ones. She moved her left hand to cup Lexa's cheek, stroking her thumb along the girl's sharp cheekbone and causing teary green eyes to snap open. They roved the blonde's face, searching for something while simultaneously memorizing every inch.

There were mere inches between them now.
"I'm not a memory, Lexa... Not yet," Clarke whispered gently, eyes incredibly soft as they met stunned emeralds.

She was suddenly struck by something. An immovable feeling, something far too profound to be labeled with words alone. Jax's words circled her mind in this moment, but she couldn't quite grasp at what she was looking for... Something about... Ah, right.

In this moment - altogether infinite and fleeting at the same time -, Clarke knew what she was looking at, what she'd found. Something that soared beyond the indescribable feeling of finding your wandering heart where it had traversed the very earth beneath your feet...

*Something like holding the better part of yourself in the palm of your hand.*

Because words could no longer suffice - and would probably *never* be able to do so again as long as Lexa continued to be...well, *Lexa* -, Clarke closed the distance between them and captured the brunette's soft lips in her own.

She allowed her lips to speak of everything her voice could not say - of tenderness, reverence, devotion, and, above all, *understanding*... This was Clarke's silent way of saying, "*I understand, I forgive you, and I won't push you.*"

Lexa was frozen in place, caught between the shock of the sudden touch and the desire to process the blonde's unspoken message. Before she had the chance to respond, though, Clarke pulled away, stepping back and turning away from the paralyzed brunette in her wake. Though every step from the other girl caused Clarke to weaken with the increasing distance she put between herself and her life-giving organ, she knew it had to be done. She had to make good on her promise and give Lexa time.

*I won't push you*...

Lexa was left gaping after the blonde's retreating form through the tree line, fingers pressed to her lips in wonder-struck awe. She allowed the underlying meaning within Clarke's message to overwhelm her like nothing ever had- a meaning that gave way to words that neither was ready to speak aloud, but that both knew they were now hopeless servants to in the presence of one another...
Clarke had lost Raven.

She didn't know how it was possible to have misplaced a *fully-grown* human being in the span of mere hours - especially one as...*vivacious* as Raven -, but she had.

"I think we're going in circles, Clarke," Octavia mumbled begrudgingly from beside the blonde, an exasperated frown on her face.

"Not possible," Clarke responded, shaking her head firmly. "I've kept the tower to our right the *entire time*... We'll find her soon, we just - "

"Clarke, stop," Octavia commanded, grasping the blonde around the arm to pull them to a stop. She dragged them over to an alleyway, out of the melee of evening commerce bustling around every corner of the city.

"You and I *both know* that we're looking for someone who doesn't want to be found. We should just let her be... Besides, you heard the Commander this morning - curfew for all of us is sundown, which happens to be *right now*... We need to get back to the tower."
Clarke hated how right the girl was.

She'd been mounted and ready on her horse to return to Polis when Lexa had finally emerged from the forest.

The Commander had been fully composed, forcing her eyes straight ahead of her as she walked past Clarke to ease onto her own saddle.

Wells was seated in front of Gustus, Raven in front of Anya, and Octavia in front of a seething Indra. It'd been agreed that this arrangement would allow them the fastest return to Polis, and the warriors had only just managed to conceal their displeasure.

Bellamy had elected to walk beside the small caravan, and he stayed by Indra and Octavia the entire time, casting occasional nervous glances up at his sister who was too busy gawking at the scenery to notice his worry.

Lexa stayed at the front of the group with Gustus and Anya not far behind her. Clarke followed them closely with Indra bringing up the rear. Meanwhile, Raven remained unconscious in front of Anya the entire journey - along with Wells who'd passed out shortly after settling into Gustus's saddle -, and the journey back to the capitol turned out to be an exceptionally quiet one.

Upon their arrival in the city, Clarke became aware of how much more calm Polis had become, and she was somewhat thankful that they'd managed to time their return in such a way. The Commander had guided them to Jax's stables, and the man was waiting patiently to assist them.

Apparently, he'd sent Belou to fetch the Commander and her generals immediately after Clarke had raced away. He moved to help the blonde dismount, as she was the last person remaining atop her steed, and he could barely contain his laughter as she slid out of the saddle like a hapless fool. Clarke was too busy blushing and awkwardly shuffling her feet to notice the Commander's pointed stare at the two of them.

They'd made their way back to the tower slowly, having to stop occasionally for Octavia and Bellamy to gape and ask a slew of questions about the various parts of the city. Lexa had calmly obliged them, answering quickly and doing her best to move them along while her warriors tried to contain their eye-rolls. Anya and Gustus were carrying Raven and Wells, respectively, and Clarke had become aware of just how bone-weary she'd been on her feet.

Once they'd reached the tower, Lexa had Indra escort Octavia and Bellamy to suitable living quarters while Raven and Wells were taken to the clinic. Clarke followed them wordlessly to have Nyko wrap her damaged hands, and the healer looked incredibly unimpressed - though obviously concerned - at the sight of her bloodied knuckles. He didn't believe anything was broken, but he told
her to be incredibly cautious of lifting anything heavy for the next few days. As for her other injuries, he instructed her to just try and be more careful with herself from now on. She'd merely sighed and nodded, dragging her feet out of the clinic as he'd begun to attend to Wells and Raven.

She hadn't paused to meet the Commander's watching gaze on her as she'd moved past the girl to the elevator, propping herself against the wall to keep her legs from giving out.

She'd then collapsed in her bed to succumb to dreamless sleep (completely unaware of the fact that Lexa had followed her up to her room not long after, cradling Clarke's injured hands in her lap and keeping her skai prisa's nightmares away for as long as she required.)

The next morning, she'd been shaken awake by a frantic Octavia claiming that Raven was going nuts in the throne room, Bellamy doing everything he could to restrain her while Wells remained in Nyko's care.

Vaguely realizing that she'd never changed out of her clothing from the night before, Clarke had bolted out of her room after Octavia to take the stairs two at a time to meet everyone else.

When they'd burst into the throne room, Clarke scanned the room and found Raven who was legitimately clawing at Bellamy as he restrained her around the waist. Anya, Gustus, Indra and Titus flanked the Commander's throne, all with rigid posture and clenched jaws as they watched the struggle continue.

Lexa sat unmoved in her throne, but her eyes had immediately locked onto Clarke the moment the blonde had come running into the room.

Clarke didn't meet the brunette's gaze as she'd run straight to Raven, cupping the girl's cheeks as she writhed and shouted in Bellamy's arms. She'd used her most placating tone to get Raven to calm down, realizing how disorienting it must've been to wake up in a completely unknown location on the ground. Add on the fact that the after-effects of a sedative that powerful left a person shaky and anxiety-ridden, and Clarke had felt nothing but sympathy for the panicked girl.

After minutes of cooing and coaxing, Clarke had finally gotten Raven to quiet into trembling whimpers, and she pulled the girl into her arms after a beat, wrapping her in a tight hug that was returned in kind.

After that, the Commander had informed them that they'd be given temporary stay in the tower until proper housing could be arranged. In addition, they'd have a curfew at sundown for the foreseeable future until they'd "adjusted" to life in the city. Lexa's warriors would be watching them to determine the most suitable job to be given to each, and they'd all most likely be placed into apprenticeships just as Clarke had been. There would also be a celebration in Polis at the end of the week to honor their arrival, during which all five members of Skaikru would swear their public allegiance to the Commander and her people - a move intended to both quell any lingering fears the Grounders might
have, as well as prove their willingness to cooperate.

Bellamy, Octavia, and Raven had all agreed to the arrangement without argument - to Clarke's immense surprise -, promising to get Wells on board, as well, and the Commander accepted their compliance with a curt nod of her head. Afterward, the four of them had been dismissed, informed that they'd be given a tour of the city by Anya and Ryder, after which they were to return to the tower.

It was only an hour after they'd returned from their easy jaunt that Clarke and Octavia had realized that Raven was missing from their group. Bellamy had agreed to go check on Wells, and the two girls had snuck out of the back entrance of the tower to begin their search.

Clarke watched the gorgeous beams of evening sunlight casting fascinating shadows off the shops near the alley she and Octavia had stopped in, and she couldn't keep an exasperated sigh from slipping out.

This was not going to win them any points from the Commander, that's for sure...

"I don't care if she doesn't want to be found, Octavia... We're not leaving her out here. We can't."

Octavia loosed a sigh of her own, rubbing agitatedly at her eyes. She worked her jaw back-and-forth.

"Fine... But, we've been looking for an hour now, and we're no closer to finding her than we were when we left the tower! Where the hell could she be?!

Clarke pursed her lips, rubbing at her temples while she thought...

If she were grieving the sudden and brutal loss of her lover only to wake up in a random place on the verge of hallucinations, where would she go? What kind of place -?

Wait a second.
"I think I know where to find her," Clarke stated out of the blue, grabbing Octavia's hand and pulling her back onto the main road.

The girls weaved through side streets and around merchants at a near-run, heading for their destination as quick as their feet would carry them without causing suspicion.

After a few minutes, Clarke stopped them in front of a shabby old shack on the western outskirts of the city. Warriors and merchants of every shape and size were stumbling out of the place, laughing and clapping each other on the back as they tripped over their own feet.

She pulled Octavia into the dimly-lit pub without another word, and the two girls stopped short at the sight in front of them.

Raven was sitting at a table surrounded by burly and gruff-looking men, currently in the middle of downing a huge mug of beer at an alarming pace with a determined scowl on her features - all while the warriors around her cheered on an elderly man opposite her doing the exact same thing. Clarke's jaw nearly dropped to the floor.

Oh, for the love of god... Raven was in the middle of a drinking competition in the sketchiest tavern in Polis.

Clarke was only vaguely aware of the fact that Octavia had burst into nervous laughter beside her as she made her way further into the pub towards Raven.

She shoved her way through large sweaty bodies who grunted in surprise and displeasure as the comparably smaller blonde pushed them aside. With an amazing stroke of luck, Clarke was able to get a grip on Raven's wrist before the girl brought another mug up to her mouth.

"Raven, stop," Clarke commanded firmly, sidling up closer to the mechanic who looked positively miffed to have been interrupted.

When the girl turned an unfocused scowl on the blonde, Clarke was rendered momentarily speechless by the amount of raw pain she could now see beneath the girl's bleary gaze. Maybe Octavia had been right about her not wanting to be found...

"Lissssten here, blondie," Raven slurred, pointing an accusing finger at Clarke. "I'm not leavin' this
fuckin' bar 'til I put this 600 pound bison in his place, and I can't leave 'til I finish this damn drink... Ya got me?"

Clarke rolled her eyes so hard they nearly popped out of her head and tumbled onto the floor.

With a burst of bravery sharper than anything she'd felt in a long time, Clarke snatched the mug from Raven's slackening grasp and chugged the disgusting beer in under ten seconds.

The warriors sitting around the table went silent as they gawked at the feisty blonde now putting them all to shame.

After another moment, the brooding horde dispersed from around them with disgruntled expressions on their faces, moving back to settle at their original tables in drunken stupors.

"There. All finished. Now, let's go, Raven -"

"Not so fast, Princess." Raven interrupted her, a shit-eating grin splitting her face all of a sudden. Clarke didn't like the look of it one bit.

"You 'n me have somethin' in common now, don't we? Misery loves company and all that nonsense..." she continued, motioning sloppily to the bartender for another round. "Life's a bitch, and alcohol's the remedy... Whaddaya say, Princess? How's about you 'n me see who's got the stronger liver up in this bitch?"

Clarke knew this was a bad idea - she really did.

But, as the blood began to rush to her cheeks a bit, she suddenly couldn't find that overwhelming urge to get back to the tower anywhere near her psyche. Raven was right - she was in pain, and it hadn't really gotten any better since she'd come to Earth. In fact, it had most definitely gotten worse in the past few hours, all things considered... What would a little alcohol hurt, right?

Besides, she'd never backed out of a challenge before...

"Alright, Reyes," Clarke conceded after a moment, a devious smile breaking out across her face. "You're on."
Raven's grin only got bigger.

"That's ma girl. Now, sit your ass down and drink!!"

As Clarke downed another mug of beer at an alarming speed, she was only vaguely aware of the fact that Octavia was giving the two girls a half-assed look of disapproval, arms crossed in front of her as she made her way over to take a seat at the table.

"Ya know what?" Clarke slurred, slamming her elbows down on the table with an exceptionally stupid look on her face. "My mom's a real bitch, isn't she? I mean, who does that, ya know?! Who murders their own husband?! I meeeean, she didn't technically kill him, but she basically pretty much did 'cause she -"

"Hey," Raven cut her off suddenly, holding up a hand to seemingly emphasize her presence in the world. "I'm gonna need you to shut the fuck up for a second, Griff... So, what? Your mom's a piece of shit and Finn is dead - I mean, reeeaaaally really dead. Dead, dead, dead..." She chuckled happily at her own words.

"What can I say? Life's a bitch, and then ya die..."

The mechanic seemed to get distracted by her own anatomy all of a sudden, as she began to examine her hand with an exaggeratedly dumbstruck expression on her face. Immediately bored with herself, the girl leaned to her right to bury her head in Clarke's ample chest, causing the blonde to struggle to maintain her balance with the newly-added weight. Octavia nearly fell out of her stool laughing so hard, which, of course, made Clarke and Raven join in heartily, too.

The chorus of their howling laughter carried far beyond the cacophony of noise from the patrons in the bar, joining with the various sounds of Polis's bustling nightlife.
Clarke was very, very drunk. She'd never been drunk before, and it was great. Alcohol tasted bad, but being drunk was good - too good. In Clarke's ridiculously inebriated state, she could only think of one thing that was missing - or, more specifically, one person...

The pub suddenly went silent as five new bodies burst through the doors - all heavy with seriousness - instantly dampening the light mood in the bar. Still falling over themselves with laughter, the three Sky Girls didn't even notice the figures now striding over to them with purpose.

An imposing figure was suddenly mere inches from Clarke's right, the blonde entirely oblivious as Raven began bucking her head against her like an angry bull. A hand was suddenly resting on the small of Clarke's back, pushing against her to keep the drunken girl on her stool.

"Clarke, what on earth are you doing here?" Lexa asked quietly, voice barely above a whisper as she subtly tried to hide her concern beneath anger in her tone. It wasn't working. "Do you not remember the details of our arrangement - of the imposed curfew?"

Clarke turned her head to look at the girl for the first time, taking note of the worry poking its way out from beneath the stoic mask devoid of warpaint. Lexa's jaw was clenched, her free hand in a fist by her side.

Anya, Indra, Gustus, and Lincoln flanked their Commander, all expressionless and watching with disdain except for...

Lincoln had the strangest look on his face all of a sudden. Clarke followed his gaze curiously to see his eyes locked onto Octavia's face for the first time, and she soon understood the brightness in his expression - as if he was now gazing upon a perfectly clear sky lit with brilliant sunlight after an entire lifetime of clouds and gloom. She smiled a little at his awestruck expression.

She looked back at Lexa whose green eyes were probing her face with barely-concealed emotions poking through the mask.

"Hey, blondie," Raven's muffled and slurred voice spoke from between her breasts, "have I told you how fuckin' great your boobs are? In fact, I think you should be my new pillow from here-on-out -"

Without warning, Raven was suddenly pulled up straight by the collar of her shirt which was locked in Lexa's white-knuckled grasp. The Commander was looking at the mechanic with something like barely-contained rage as she seemed to have just now noticed where Raven's head had been - her eyes had been too trained on Clarke's face to notice much else. The emeralds were alight with a fierceness Clarke had only seen a handful of times - usually as a result of a threat to the blonde -, and
it frightened her to see such a gaze directed at her friend. She was legitimately afraid that Raven might shrivel up beneath the intensity of it...

Sobering up just the slightest bit, Clarke placed a gentle hand on Lexa's outstretched arm, kneading her fingertips into muscular flesh. The brunette's eyes immediately snapped to meet placating blues, softening slightly under the gaze.

Clarke simply shook her head, not willing to trust words enough to talk herself out of this situation.

After far too long of being locked in a wordless conversation with the blonde, Lexa finally relented, releasing a confused Raven who slumped back into the waiting arms of Anya - who'd seemingly appeared out of nowhere to support the mechanic from behind. Lincoln moved to help Octavia who immediately threw her arms around his neck in earnest as he lifted her from the seat. He cradled the girl against his chest, and the two of them stared into each other's eyes with wondering expressions as he made his way from the pub with her.

Anya scooped Raven into her arms, and the mechanic immediately fell unconsciousness as the warrior carried her out the door. Indra and Gustus waited for their Commander to make a move.

Clarke must've missed the part when Lexa had signaled her warriors to begin removing the girls from the bar, but whatever. She lacked the ability to care as she slumped forwards toward the table - and she probably would've banged her head on the wooden surface had it not been for the strong arms suddenly surrounding her from behind. They secured her gently and maneuvered her so that she somehow ended up cradled in the brunette's grasp.

Clarke didn't care how many people were watching as she allowed her head to lull over to the side, falling against Lexa's shoulder in a far-too intimate manner.

She could feel that she was being carried somewhere, but she was much too drunk to pay proper attention to what was happening or where she was going. Her head was swimming uncomfortably all of a sudden...

*You're not the only one trying to atone for the sins of a parent...*

Her own mother had ended the life of the one person she had vowed to love until her last breath, the one person who was supposed to have been her partner - her equal. The one person that Clarke had kept as the paragon of all good in her life.
How could her mom do that to him? To all of them?! She was the reason that Clarke was in this mess, to begin with - the reason that Clarke now felt the lives of so many burdening her shoulders and worsening her symbolic posture. Why did the weight of her mother's mistakes have to be on Clarke's shoulders now?

Why?!

Clarke was suddenly pulled out of her increasingly-frantic thoughts by the closing of the elevator doors in the tower.

She had no idea how Lexa had gotten her there so quickly, but she figured it had something to do with the fact that she'd kept weaving in-and-out of a semi-conscious stupor since she'd been secured in the girl's grasp. She became aware of the fact that Lexa was staring down at her now as they ascended the tower, mask still in place but with a slew of conflicting emotions dancing in her eyes as she scanned the blonde's face at length.

Without so much as a word, Clarke clumsily brought her left hand up to cup the brunette's face, surprising both herself and Lexa - whose eyes widened almost-imperceptibly at the contact.

"Why are you so pretty, Lexa?" Clarke slurred, narrowing her eyes as her expression became the epitome of drunkenness. "I think I like your face too much - too, too, too much, yes. Can you tell me why I do, Lex?"

The brunette looked utterly stunned by Clarke's words, her lips twitching slightly as her mask fell a little under the weight of her amusement. She closed her eyes for a moment in an apparent attempt to compose herself. When she opened them again, Lexa was every bit the Commander.

Her eyes were trained straight forward, notably away from the blonde as she clenched her jaw against the desire to respond.

Clarke dropped her hand, letting it swing loosely by her side as she frowned with displeasure. Why didn't Lexa answer her question? It wasn't very nice to ignore people...

Before she got her answer, though, Lexa was opening the door to Clarke's bedroom and carrying the blonde to her bed where she set her down on the furs with exceptional gentleness.

Clarke flopped back onto the pillows gracelessly, smiling stupidly to herself as she began to hum with her eyes closed.
She could feel Lexa silently standing over her still, watchful as always.

She stuck her right hand up and began searching, making a sound of contentment when Lexa obliged and placed her hand in the needy blonde's damaged one. Clarke tugged, whining like a little kid while trying with everything she had to pull Lexa down on top of her.

The Commander finally gave in somewhat, sinking down beside Clarke on the bed. With her eyes still closed, Clarke wriggled over towards the center of the bed, trying her best to pull Lexa with her.

After what felt like hours to the blonde's drunken brain, Lexa sighed in something like defeat and moved so that she was lying down beside Clarke, who smiled sweetly in the brunette's general direction and turned to immediately nuzzle her head into Lexa's chest.

Lexa froze at the contact, seemingly conflicted about what to do next as Clarke disentangled their hands to wrap her arms tightly around the brunette's waist. She didn't wait for Lexa to respond before she spoke again.

"You smell nice," she mumbled with conviction, voice muffled by Lexa's skin. "Like...lavender, maybe? And...grass. But good grass, the fresh kinda grass - or, no, wait... Maybe that's mint? Oh hell, I dunno... You just smell like Lexa, Lexa. And it's very, veeeerryyyy nice. Yep yep yep..."

Clarke's ridiculous rambling finally spurred Lexa to action, causing her to wrap the blonde protectively in her arms as she buried her nose in the golden tresses and tucked Clarke's head beneath her chin, effectively muffling her light chuckles as she did so.

"And you smell like sunshine," Lexa whispered fondly into her hair, nuzzling into the blonde a little.

The uncharacteristically affectionate action caused Clarke to shudder a little, and she grasped onto the back of Lexa's coat with renewed fervor.

Even in her inebriated state, Clarke had been prepared for a bit of a fight from Lexa - the girl who'd kept her at a painful arm's length ever since they'd had their passionate...collision, of sorts.

She'd made her feelings as obvious as she cared to, not one to typically allow herself to be so vulnerable with another person... But, in this case, she found that she simply couldn't help it. Despite her growing dismay at the prospect, Clarke was finding more and more that she was coming to legitimately need this stubborn girl in her arms - needing to keep her heart as close to her as humanly possible for the rest of her days.

Being in Lexa's presence was like taking a relieving breath of fresh air she didn't even know she
needed, and Clarke found that she was becoming addicted to the simple ritual of inhaling and exhaling more than she ever thought she would be.

"Sunshine and...beer," Lexa amended a little disapprovingly, shifting Clarke a little so that she could pull the blonde impossibly closer. "Normally, I'm not one to question the nighttime activities of the inhabitants of this city, but...I've never seen you like this before, Clarke, and -"

Lexa swallowed, clearly struggling with what she needed to say.

"You deliberately disregarded the curfew we agreed to, and - although I know you're not particularly...fond of authority, to say the least - I know this isn't just a reckless display of rebellion... You've been working for some form of peace for your people since you got here, and I know you wouldn't just throw all of that away for one night in a pub... I know you, Clarke, and I....I'm worried about you..." Lexa's voice was a whisper now, and Clarke didn't miss the unmistakable trembling in the girl's soft voice - almost as if it terrified her to admit to this.

Clarke simply buried her face further into Lexa's neck, moving her left leg to push between Lexa's a little - a movement which caused the brunette's entire body to shudder.

Coming back to herself quickly, Lexa began to massage the back of Clarke's head, stroking the blonde's hair gently as if to coax an answer out of her.

"Please, Clarke... Talk to me," Lexa practically begged, fingertips still worshipping at Clarke's scalp. Clarke shivered at the sheer tenderness of it. "I need to know what's going on... I need to know that you're okay."

Clarke didn't realize that she was crying until Lexa stiffened beneath her at the feel of wetness on the bare skin of her neck. She tried to pull back as if in the hopes of scanning the blonde's face, but Clarke didn't let her, simply holding on tighter.

Lexa's hands had stilled in her hair now, waiting...

"It was my mom," Clarke finally whispered after an infinite moment, sniffling a little as her tears continued to fall. "She killed him, Lexa, l-let me think that it...was...Wells...and I h-hurt him..."

Clarke was full-on sobbing now. Lexa's heart rate had picked up with apparent alarm at the blonde's words.
"Killed who, Clarke?" Lexa asked desperately, hands still unmoving in the blonde's hair. "Who did she kill?"

Clarke just sobbed harder, grasping onto Lexa - who was breathing rather rapidly now - for dear life.

_This was all too much..._

"My dad," Clarke finally choked out, inhuman noises clawing harshly at the inside of her throat. "She k-killed m-my dad, Lexa. Her husband..."

Lexa froze for a moment, seemingly stunned into paralysis at the information. Her whole body went completely still as she attempted to process the news.

Clarke, in the meantime, continued to be wracked by full-body sobs.

Then, after another long moment, Lexa suddenly wrapped her arms around Clarke's waist and turned them over so that the blonde was fully on top of her, clinging onto her like a frightened child. She sat up slowly in the bed, still holding the blonde in her protective grasp, and moved her hands so that she could work Clarke's legs around her waist. Once she was sure that Clarke was fully secured, she scooted back so that she could rest against the headboard, Clarke situated firmly in her lap as she held onto the blonde like she'd never let her go again.

"Oh, Clarke... Ai Klark, I...I am so sorry," Lexa whispered, voice trembling and broken with what sounded like unshed tears as she seemingly tried to physically _fuse_ their bodies together now. "I had no idea... What can I do, Clarke? Tell me what you need me to do... I'll do _anything_..."

The pleadingly raw desperation in the girl's voice shattered Clarke's heart to pieces while simultaneously mending it back together in the strangest of ways. The implication of what those words _meant_...

"*Please, Clarke...*"

Clarke nuzzled further into the girl, picking up where Lexa's physical inability to pull them closer had left off.
She'd never actually been so close to someone before, in the physical sense - not even when Lexa had cradled the blonde on her lap in the forest.

"Just...don't leave me, Lexa," Clarke responded pathetically after a beat, suddenly overcome by the utter hopelessness Anya had once pegged her as being prone to...

She couldn't fight it anymore.

"Please, just...don't leave... I can't - I just...please. Not now...," Clarke begged between heart-wrenching sobs, unashamed of the amount of raw and unhidden emotion in her voice.

She was so beyond powerless...

At Clarke's raw vulnerability and desperate begging, Lexa's breath hitched where she brought the blonde impossibly closer. Her left hand cradled Clarke's head as her right rubbed soothing circles in the girl's back.

"Okay, Clarke, it's okay... Shhh, it's okay," Lexa cooed, doing everything she could to calm Clarke's rapid hyperventilating. "Just breathe, hodnes, please... You're okay, you're safe... I'm right here." 

Lexa suddenly moved to grasp the sides of Clarke's face, gently adjusting the blonde to rest their foreheads together. Clarke couldn't open her swollen eyes at this point, and Lexa would never have asked her to, anyways.

"Listen to me, Clarke," Lexa imbibed passionately, her grip tender yet firm on the sides of Clarke's face. "I'm not going anywhere, do you hear me? I'm not moving from this spot until you physically force me to, okay? I won't leave you, and I -"

Lexa choked, struggling immensely with the lump Clarke could practically hear in the girl's throat.

"I can't stay away from you anymore, either... I just can't, Clarke. I won't... It...It physically pains me to do so, and I refuse to put myself through that anymore... And I know it's selfish of me, and I know it's going to put you at a risk I don't know if I can handle, but I..."
Lexa trailed off, fighting harder than Clarke believed she ever had against a battle she was seemingly destined to lose.

"I promise you, Clarke... From this moment on, I will be right here - and wherever else you need me to be, for that matter... You'll never be alone in this, and I'm going to be with you every step of the way..."

Lexa swallowed harshly, steeling herself against the impending tidal wave in which Clarke was already drowning.

"I will always be with you."

At those words, it was as if Clarke's soul seemed to still into a peaceful calmness, reveling in the sudden warmth of the underlying message it was given free reign to bask in.

Her sobbing stopped, her body ceased it's trembling, and her entire being seemed to positively glow from within as Lexa pressed a chaste and tender kiss to her lips, confirming to Clarke what they'd both known since their souls' very first encounter...

*I love you, too.*
Chapter End Notes

Sooo what did ya think? Worth the wait, I hope? lolol

Special Announcement (perhaps?): I've officially decided that this story is gonna have a Part Twooo!!! I haven't yet decided how many chapters are going to be in Part One, but I'll be sure to change the settings on the fic as soon as I know for sure!!

I think it's gonna be pretty nuts, so hopefully y'all stick around for the ride... (;
GUESS WHO'S BACK?!?!
OMG I can't believe it's been a month I'm the literal worst y'all... I'm sooo sorry about that!!! Life in Peru was busy as hell and then I came straight back, went to a five-day conference the following day, and now I'm back at school - officially a freaking junior in college like how did that happen?! Anywaaaays, I'm so happy to be back and know that the updates won't be nearly as spacey going forward since I know my schedule now!! Hope you guys are still sticking with me cuz you're all so freaking awesome and I LOVE your feedback holy crap!! Maybe go back and read the previous chapter as a refresher? lol idk I know I'm ridiculous.

Without further ado, enjoy!!! (: 

The next few days leading up to the festival were a blur.

Polis was bustling with more excitement than Clarke had ever seen before, and the sheer number of people who kept arriving in the city day by day was astonishing. Large tents had been set up on the less-populated grassy outskirts of the perimeter to accommodate the masses, and Clarke found that it made her job much easier when her clientele were all centered in one place, more or less, still acting as the traveling pediatrician of the capitol.

She hadn't known that there were so many human children in existence at this point in time, let alone that they all seemed to live somewhere within the boundaries of the 12 Clans.

Though they were all children, of course, Clarke couldn't help but notice how starkly different the visiting kids were from those who'd grown up in the safer confines of the city walls. Not only were their clothes and markings exceptionally distinctive and telling of their clans of origin, but the way
that they carried themselves in such close proximity to their Commander - as if they were all already seasoned warriors ready to strike at any moment - put Clarke slightly off-balance when she was around them. It didn't sit well with her for children to seem so jaded and battle-weary in such a way already, but she supposed that she'd probably be the same way if she'd grown up in an environment where literally everything was out to end her life prematurely - which, in a way, she basically had (though she didn't want to dwell on that too much).

She'd adjusted to their demeanor quickly, though, and found immense comfort in the fact that she wasn't the only one having to deal with a slightly jarring work detail as of late.

While Wells remained in the clinic under Nyko's close care for the time-being, Bellamy, Octavia, and Raven were being shuffled about from one job to the next under the watchful eye of Lexa's generals.

Bellamy and Octavia seemed to undertake each new assignment with competitive vigor, determined to outshine each other and quench some long-lasting thirst for sibling rivalry that had been quelled on the Ark for quite some time now.

Gustus watched over Bellamy, offering zero praise and mere huffs of acknowledgement when the boy did one of his various assigned tasks well. Bellamy was determined to make the man see his potential, though, and it seemed to Clarke as if he had actually begun to see the older man as something of a role model for himself. She saw some similarities in both of them, after all: both fiercely loyal, protective of their own, and overly stubborn in every possible way.

Meanwhile, Octavia had been paired with Indra - whose face seemed to be set in a permanent scowl at all times -, as well as Lincoln, who watched the girl with unhidden admiration and growing fondness. The younger Blake approached every task with a poignant curiosity, and Clarke didn't miss the way Indra would furrow her brows in confusion, struggling to figure out how to read the younger girl who seemed so well-suited for physical labor of some sort - just like her brother - but whose eyes contained the watchful intelligence of a seasoned warrior.

Raven, on the other hand, was proving to be a much more...difficult person to place.

Clarke often heard the mechanic before she saw her, all bombastic tones and begrudging compliance echoing off of seemingly every corner of the city. She had to admit, though - watching Raven struggle through every job she found unworthy of her talents was, by far, the most amusing thing she'd ever had the privilege of witnessing.

On one particularly memorable occasion, she'd followed the girl's angry voice through a quiet sector
of the city to a small wooden cottage she was only vaguely-familiar with, and found herself clutching her sides with laughter at the sight of Raven in the ridiculous apron and bonnet of the esteemed bakers of the northern quarter - whose main shop they were apparently working in.

There'd been loaves of bread, cookies, cakes, and pies scattered all over the place - on the walls, ceiling, floors, and every other visible surface, really -, and Raven looked like she'd been about ready to throw another pie at a plump little man who looked frightened to within an inch of his life at the mechanic's animated threatening. She was in the middle of explaining just where she thought the man should shove the pie when Clarke had crept around him - totally unbeknownst to Raven -, snatched the pie from the girl's grasp, and slammed it into the mechanic's face without warning.

She'd been rewarded by generous (and surprising) laughter from Anya - who'd apparently been observing the scene from the shadows with a wry grin on her face the whole time, unwilling to stop her entertainment at the expense of the man - and barely had time to admire her handiwork before Raven had picked a bowl of cake batter up from the countertop and poured the contents over Clarke's head.

Before she knew it, the two of them were engaged in a battle of ridiculous will, both girls howling with laughter as they'd pelted each other with baked goods of all sorts. Any and every customer had vacated the premises for their own safety, and the girls' only supervision came from a very unhelpful Anya, who'd simply watched with a shit-eating grin on her face as Raven had rolled on top of Clarke on the floor to shove berry cobbler into the blonde's mouth, purposefully missing by quite a large margin to smear it on literally every visible inch of her face.

Right as Raven had been about to crack a raw egg over Clarke's head, though, the two had been interrupted by the sound of someone clearing their throat from the doorway of the bakery.

Both girls had nearly snapped their necks to whip around and gawk at none other than the Commander standing in the doorway, one eyebrow raised in an otherwise stoic expression. Her posture had been a little too straight, her arms crossed tightly behind her, and Clarke had known immediately that the girl was fighting back some sort of a strong response to the sight of the two girls in such a position - though, what that reaction might be, Clarke couldn't begin to guess.

Anya had then curiously remembered her role as responsible "supervisor," removing Raven from atop Clarke by the back of her shirt and pulling the blonde up in one fell-swoop. She'd shoved the two miscreants towards the door - as if she needed to emphasize her disapproval of their behavior all of a sudden -, and they'd made their way to the expressionless Commander still standing in the doorway who'd instructed them to craft a formal apology to the bakers whose shop they'd overtaken and ruined.

They'd complied immediately, ducking their heads and shuffling their feet like reprimanded children as they made their way back to the tower behind Lexa and Anya in silence.
To the blonde's utter dismay, Raven had still managed to smash that damn egg over Clarke's head along the way without either of the other women noticing.

Though Clarke's mood seemed to shift like the tides in a storm as of late - what with the occasional jarring reminder of her mother's betrayal -, she couldn't remember a time when she'd felt so indescribably whole - all because of that wandering piece of herself that had finally been placed in its rightful spot once more.

Lexa had made good on her promise to Clarke, and the blonde rarely went more than a couple of hours without at least catching a glimpse of the Commander.

They'd steal glances from across courtyards and marketplaces, brush shoulders around corners and doorways, and revel in the warmth of each other's presence in as many ways as possible.

Lexa made sure that Clarke knew she was there, that she was never alone, and that she knew that someone truly cared about her in the purest of ways, and the blonde didn't know if she'd ever be able to thank the other girl for the healing comfort that mere knowledge was providing.

In addition to that, the Commander had insisted that the Sky People join her for meals at night - along with her warriors, Nyko, Lincoln, and surprisingly, Belou and Zenya -, and the Commander would sit at the head of her large table and simply observe the dinner scene, not usually partaking in conversation of any kind (typically too preoccupied with watching Clarke's mouth move and subtly following the blonde's every movement out of the corner of her eye).

Afterwards, they'd all bid each other good night and the Commander would disappear to her throne room with her warriors to strategize and attend to any pressing concerns her position demanded. Clarke and her friends would retreat to their separate bedrooms, and the blonde would usually sketch the cityscape or read classic literature until she fell asleep.

Hours later, though, - long after Polis had fallen into a quiet slumber of its own - Lexa would stealthily make her way into Clarke's room, peel back the fur covers, and settle herself in comfortably so that she could wrap the blonde in her arms. Clarke would shake herself awake long enough to scoot as close to the brunette as possible, often sleepily - and uncharacteristically - giggling as Lexa would pepper feathery kisses across her forehead, down her cheeks, and along her jawline while rubbing soothing circles into her back like clockwork. She'd tuck her head into Lexa's chest and press tender kisses along the girl's collarbone to return the favor - a move which never failed to send noticeable chills down the brunette's spine.

They would then fall asleep wrapped around each other in all the ways that mattered.

Every morning, though, Clarke would somehow wake up on top of Lexa. Her forehead would
usually be pressed to the brunette's neck, her legs wedged between the other girl's with their hands intertwined at strange angles splayed every which way.

She'd been embarrassed at first, thinking that she'd rolled on top of Lexa to crush the girl in her sleep - until she'd tried to remove her body weight the first time and had realized that their arrangement was completely and shamelessly intentional on Lexa's part.

Each time she'd try to shift her weight off of the brunette, Lexa would simply whine a little and pull the blonde impossibly closer, untangling their fingers so that she could wrap her arms possessively around Clarke's waist as if she couldn't bear for the blonde to move even a single inch from her. At that point, knowing that Lexa was awake enough to protest in such a way, Clarke would smile deviously to herself and begin to pepper sloppy kisses across the brunette's face and would always wind up latched onto the girl's plump lips until she felt the kiss being enthusiastically returned.

And, boy, would it be...

Clarke couldn't count the number of times they'd almost...lost control in the days before the festival. Their kisses would turn searing, their touches worshipping, and it would leave Clarke positively aching for the brunette.

The morning kisses were always the hardest, as both girls were usually swept away in the stunning revelation that they'd woken up in each other's arms, and their groggy minds saw no reason for them not to give every last available piece of themselves to the other. Lexa would always come back down to earth first, though, but it never felt like rejection anymore - all because the brunette had finally explained her lingering hesitation the first morning they'd spent together, and Clarke had truly, truly understood.

As it so happened, Lexa and Costia had met when they were thirteen years old, and they'd instantly formed a connection that had blossomed into a glorious first love after a year or so. It was pure, innocent, and light, and both girls sought to discover the world through the lens of the other's eyes.

Because of the fact that Lexa had Ascended in her twelfth year, though, they'd known that their relationship would be forever strained by the various burdens of the position. Lexa was constantly separated from Costia, forced to leave the girl behind in Polis as she'd attempted to piece together the beginnings of her Coalition, and it put an immense strain on both of them that they felt in every fiber of their beings. It also gave them less time to be as intimate as they would've liked, according to Lexa... Though they'd explored each other's bodies relentlessly during their time together, they'd only made love twice towards the end of their relationship - and Costia's life.

The experience of losing her love after giving herself over entirely had been agonizing for Lexa, and it'd left her vulnerable and, frankly, terrified to ever allow herself to be exposed in such a way again.

If she gave herself to Clarke in that way, too, allowed her soul to be laid bare for potential tarnish
once more, Lexa knew that her original prophecy would come true - Clarke would absolutely *ruin* her.

Because Clarke was the tidal wave in an otherwise-calm sea - all wonder, majesty, and *irreversibility*, and nothing would be able to keep Lexa from drowning within those depths for the rest of her days - from succumbing to the most powerful feeling she'd ever known.

If she gave herself to Clarke, she would never be able to let her go, would never be able to part from the piece of herself that she needed in order to function properly - to simply *breathe* - from that day on.

And Clarke had understood wholeheartedly. Truth be told, she felt much the same way. The thought of making love for the first time with the very person who'd given visceral *meaning* to the word was slightly more than intimidating, to say the least...

What would it feel like to legitimately re-connect with her heart after such a long physically separation? Would she even *survive* such an experience?

Despite both of their fears, though, they couldn't help the way their bodies responded to each other - the way it seemed as if their hearts were fully willing to embrace whatever pain may come if their minds would just allow them to have each other...

They always stopped, though. Somehow, some way, they did.

Almost as if by some unseen cue, Clarke would stand facing the window and readjust her sleep clothes back into place, attempting to shakily tame her hair as Lexa would sit on the edge of the bed, grab onto the blonde's hips from behind, and press tender yet regretful kisses to every exposed inch of Clarke's back before rising and wrapping her arms around the girl's waist - which really *didn't help*.

They'd sway a little in each other's arms, closing their eyes and reveling in their quiet peace for fleeting moments until Lexa would spin Clarke around to press one last heated kiss to her lips before making her way back to her room at the crack of dawn to prepare for the long day ahead.

It was routine, and it was bliss.

It was the best thing she'd ever known.
And, god, was she in love.

"Hold still."

"Fu - ow, Raven. What the hell?!" Octavia protested as the mechanic forced yet another golden flower into the girl's intricate braids constructed by Lexa's handmaidens. Octavia tried to bring her hand up to halt the other girl's harsh movements, but Raven simply slapped it away with a foreboding scowl on her face.

Clarke, already having finished with hair and makeup, was sitting in a chair a few feet behind Octavia's vanity, watching the whole ordeal with a slight grin on her face.

The opening ceremony of the celebration began in less that half an hour, and the three of them needed to book it in order to get dressed in time. The main stage where they'd be bowing to the Commander and swearing their loyalty to her was set in the arena typically used for challenges and duels - which had been rearranged for the night's festivities to fit the larger crowd.

"Guys, come on," Clarke spoke up, getting slightly more agitated as time continued to tick by. "We're gonna be late if you don't stop sticking thorns in her hair, Raven."

The mechanic whipped around to throw an exaggerated glare in Clarke's direction before quickly turning back to her handiwork.
"Shut up and drink some of that wine I stole. It'll pull your panties right back out of your ass for ya - you'll see," she promised, sticking yet another golden rose into Octavia's hair as the younger girl rolled her eyes. 

"Besides, you can't rush perfection."

"I don't even know why you wanted to 'accessorize' my hair in the first place... I look like I lost a fight with a damn rose bush, Raven!!" Octavia whined in protest, slapping her hands on her thighs in exasperation. Raven simply smiled at the girl's reflection in the mirror.

"Never question your elders, my child," Raven responded, sounding every bit as haughty as she looked.

Clarke snorted, shaking her head as she stood to leave the room.

"Whatever. You're ridiculous, Reyes... I'm gonna go get dressed, and you two better be ready when I come back here, understand me?" Clarke stood with her hands on her hips, looking and feeling far too much like Abby Griffin for her liking in that moment.

Raven didn't look up as she responded.

"Yes, of course, mother dearest. Anything to please you."

Clarke couldn't fight her intense eye roll as she made her way from the room and hurried to the elevator, ascending the few floors to her room where a handmaiden awaited her.

She bowed her head apologetically to the young woman who simply smiled softly in return.

Without another word, Clarke peeled her clothes off and allowed the woman to help her into the dress that had been carefully stitched for her. She hadn't questioned how Lexa had known her measurements or why she'd chosen a deep blue color that was only a shade or two darker than her eyes. She'd simply gawked at the astonishing beauty of the floor-length, skintight number that would've given her mother - always the conservative, now her least-favorite person - a heart attack had she seen her daughter in such a...revealing dress.
The rich material clung to every curve Clarke had to offer in an impossibly flattering manner, beautifully accentuating her hips and generous breasts. It was simple by design, sleeveless and giving way to a slit that ran just below her bosom to a little past the top of her rib cage. She wore an intricate metal cuff around her left bicep that wound around her arm like a golden snake with hundreds of precious stones along its length. She wore gold rings of different designs on every finger of her right hand - which, along with her left, was still a bit mangled but healed enough to accommodate the jewels - with no earrings, bracelets, or necklace. It was a deliberate style choice, intended to allow all attention to go to her face.

Her makeup was immaculate, and never in her life had Clarke believed she could look so otherworldly, in any way. Her skin positively glowed, her lips were smooth and colored in a sensuous red, and her eyes were shadowed by a perfectly designed blend of metallics with hints of blue to bring out the hidden specs in her eyes. The long waves of her hair had been preserved and perfected with some sort of product, two smaller braids weaved around the crown on her head to meet a decorative rose - sprayed a metallic gold - in the back. She still looked like herself - only, a version of herself that had been polished by the gods, themselves, and presented to the people of Earth as an example of what attainable perfection looked like.

Clarke was never one to fuss over her appearance much, but the finished look - complimented by golden gladiator-type sandals - had her feeling almost giddy with excitement.

She couldn't wait to see how a certain someone reacted...

After another couple minutes of fussing and finalizing, the handmaiden ushered her out of her room and into the elevator to descend the tower to its ground floor. Upon emerging from the box, Clarke was greeted by something akin to organized chaos as workers of every type rushed about and shouted orders to each other in Trigesdasleng. The woman pushed her through the melee with a firm hand on her back, and Clarke smiled with relief at the sight of Raven, Octavia, Bellamy, and Wells all ready and waiting anxiously by the main door they would exit from.

Raven's hair was in an intricately braided up-do that left a few tendrils of her dark hair cascading around her shoulders, her makeup beautifully done to complement the deep crimson hue of her dress that was only slightly darker than her favorite jacket. It was strapless and floor-length with a simple design like both Clarke's and Octavia's, with gold gladiator sandals and sparse jewelry to match the other girls, as well.

Octavia wore a richly dark racing green long-sleeved dress below her intricate down-do that had been woven with the beautiful golden flowers, and Clarke was surprised to note how tasteful Raven had been with the flowers despite how insane her efforts had seemed. Her makeup was flawless, as well.

Bellamy and Wells looked sharp and dapper in the newly-issued formal uniforms of the warriors in
the Commander's army, with dark cloaks hanging off of one shoulder and leather stitched into the plating of the torso. They struck magnificent figures in the dark garb, metallic gold plated into the shoulder guards of both boys' shoulder-guards.

Clarke was pleased to noted that Wells's face looked significantly less swollen and bloody, his features much more discernible than they were a few days ago.

They'd been informed that it was customary for the honored guests at such celebrations to be adorned with gold somewhere on their person, distinguishing them from the crowds and symbolizing their status as the focus of the event. It also signified them as being under the protection of the Commander and her army - and that anyone who should seek to harm them would be committing treason against their Heda.

Without warning, the handmaidens began lining them up in a very specific order: Clarke by herself at the front followed by the Blake siblings and Wells with Raven. Both pairs had their arms linked, and Clarke couldn't help but fidget anxiously at being forced to walk out onto the stage alone while her friends had each other to lean on - though the symbolism was not lost on her.

After another moment, the two guards at the door moved to push them open, and the handmaidens gave them the signal to begin walking. Though they hadn't actually practiced anything, they'd all been informed of little cues to pay attention to throughout the night, and that was simply the first of many.

The roar of the crowd was deafening.

The sheer mass of people gathered in the marketplace directly outside of the tower was enough to make Clarke's head spin. People of every creed created a cacophony of noise around them so powerful that Clarke almost believed the crowd might be loud enough to snap the thin tether of reality that kept them all grounded - just by sound, alone.

A path had been cleared for them to proceed through the crowd in the marketplace, and Clarke forced her eyes straight ahead of her to avoid being overwhelmed by the prospect of having to meet so many scrutinizing stares on her person. Clarke felt hands reach out and graze her, was forced to meet the occasional gaze of one person or another who had decided that they wanted to make themselves truly known to the skai prisa - whose identity had gone wholly unconfirmed up until this point. To them, she was simply the recovering healer who entertained and cared for their children on a daily basis, and she was a little bitter to have to give up that persona, if she was being honest with herself.

All to trade it for the position as acting leader and head representative of the Skaikru.
They made their way through the melee relatively quickly, making a direct beeline towards the arena that had been re-purposed to accommodate the demands of the ceremony. Clarke didn't have time - or the presence of mind - to look behind her and check on her friends, suddenly too distracted by the stage currently just yards away.

Devoid of everything but the Commander's throne and a few aptly place banners that marked the occasion, the stage stood large and intimidating with five figures waiting to greet them. They were headed straight for the stage now, and, although Clarke could clearly see the careful arrangement of the Commander's advisor and warriors flanking her throne, she could only really focus on the woman standing before the elaborate center piece now.

As if pulled by some sort of internalized magnet, Lexa's eyes locked onto Clarke the moment the blonde emerged in the arena. In that moment, it was as if the raucous crowd ceased to exist - as if the only two people left on the planet were the two girls whose souls seemed to call to each other like halves of a whole.

Though the Commander had been the picture of stoicism up until this moment, Clarke - having gotten to know the girl as she had as of late - watched as the girl before her struggled with everything she had not to completely fall to pieces before her eyes.

Upon seeing the blonde adorned in her deep blue dress with hair and makeup done to give off the impression of the capture of an actual goddess upon the earth, Lexa legitimately gasped, eyes going comically wide for a moment as the emeralds proceeded to memorize every detail of the girl before her with the careful precision of one having been tasked with such an exercise in order to simply live to see another day. Clarke's entire being seemed to flush under the heat of the gaze that was so unapologetically appreciative and somewhat carnal that it gave new meaning to the idea of being undressed by someone's eyes, alone. From Lexa's body language, it appeared that the brunette was attempting to keep herself from succumbing to a physical reaction of some sort - one that would, perhaps, involve the girl bolting off of the stage to capture the fallen goddess in her arms and steal her away so that she could worship the blonde away from prying eyes...

As Clarke begun the slow ascent up the few stairs at the right side of the stage, Lexa's heavy gaze glued to her the entire way, she only barely registered the pristine uniform adorned with the Crimson sash and specially-done hairstyle complete with the usual warpaint the girl sported. She was too preoccupied with trying to keep herself from melting into a hopeless puddle at the feet of the girl who she'd willingly give every piece of herself to - if only because she trusted Lexa to care for her more than she trusted herself, at this point.

Seemingly realizing that she was very obviously ravishing Clarke with her eyes in front of the majority of her subjects gathered to view the spectacle, the Commander suddenly came back to herself, easily schooling her visceral reaction beneath the mask of nonchalant stoicism and distinguished authority. Clarke almost smirked at the sudden change of expression, but contained
herself in the interest of ascending the few steps remaining to the stage with as much grace as she could muster.

Her blood was pounding in her ears as she crossed the short distance to stand in front of the Commander. The other Skaikru fell in beside her, flanking her on both sides. It was only then that Clarke realized that there had been drums beating in steady rhythm during their entire journey to the stage, the sound otherwise drowned out by the sheer volume of the crowd.

As the beat began to speed to a crescendo, the Commander raised both arms in a gesture to quiet the crowd - which saw an immediate effect as the entire population seemed to silence within seconds. Clarke and her friends took their second cue of the night, lowering themselves to their knees before the Commander and looking up to meet her gaze in subservience.

As Lexa began to speak, Titus stepped up beside her to stare somewhat disdainfully down at the kneeling Skaikru, and Clarke had to chew the inside of her cheek to keep her face from screwing up into a scowl. It seemed no amount of time or exposure to the man would give Clarke reason to even remotely like him - or respect his authority, for that matter.

The Commander's address to the captivated crowd was entirely in Trigesdasleng, as Clarke had expected, and she struggled a bit to keep up with the poetic lilt of the speech. All of her practice with the foreign tongue hadn't been enough to prepare her for such a complex oration, it seemed. Despite the slight language barrier, though, Clarke found that the sheer power behind Lexa's words was enough to capture her attention tenfold, sending chills down her spine every time the Commander would pause to allow for the roaring cheers of the crowd.

As the speech continued, Clarke noticed Bellamy and Octavia kneeling on her left and right, expressions awe-struck as they took in the sight of the Commander in her element, surrounded by droves of loyal followers willing to sacrifice their lives for her at any moment.

At the next break in the address, Lexa signaled for Anya to come forward with the small leather box containing the five golden cuffs that would be placed on the left wrist of every member of Skaikru - a physical symbol of their loyalty to the Commander and her people going forward.

Clarke and her friends presented their wrists and watched as Lexa motioned for Anya to begin placing the cuffs on their arms as she continued to speak. The warrior made haste of the work, finishing before the Commander could even get to her next break in the speech, and she stepped back behind the other girl to join Indra and Gustus once more. Clarke knew this was their next cue and she gave a subtle nod to her friends to bow their heads before the Commander as the girl drew her sword from her belt and held it out above the kneeling figures of the Skaikru. Finally, the blonde picked up on the last bit of the speech - the most important lines of the entire address, really:

"With this, an oath of blood, we will accept the members of Skaikru as our own. From henceforth, their souls shall be seen as intertwined with the great spirit of Keryon, just as our own have been
from the time of our births." The Commander shifted her gaze from the lofty direction of the crowd to the kneeling Skaikru and looked upon them with as much expectation and passion as her stoic mask allowed to slip through. Switching to Gonasleng now, she asked her final question.

"Will you take this oath before a crowd of your equals?"

Clarke and her friends all looked up to meet the Commander's gaze at the same time, uttering a firm "sha, Heda," in unison.

With a single nod of acceptance, the Commander sheathed her sword and drew her knife from her belt, walking a couple of steps with Titus on her heels to begin with Raven on the far left. The mechanic held her left hand out immediately and winced a little as the blade bit into her palm, drawing blood instantly as Titus muttered ancient prayers in Trigedasleng beneath his breath. Raven allowed the blood to blossom from her wound and drip onto the stage, meeting the Commander's gaze with a slight bit of reverence as the leader claimed her as one of her own.

Clarke noticed the same near-worshipful expression on Bellamy's face as the boy allowed the Commander to carry out the ritual on him, and it brought a lump her her throat when she realized that this was probably the first time in any of her friends' lives that they'd ever felt truly accepted by a leader they'd sought to follow - ever truly felt like they were a part of something in which they could find true solace and comfort.

As Lexa approached a kneeling Clarke, the blonde realized with a start that, unlike her friends, she didn't need any ritual in order to feel like she belonged to something.

As soon as she'd felt the earth beneath her feet, felt the first bite of ice water capturing her in its depths, taken the first gulp of air breathed alive by the thousands of trees thriving in a recovering world, she'd felt it - felt the personification of what belonging was supposed to be.

More importantly, though, she'd trekked across the stars and forests to acquaint herself with an emerald soul and a heart that beat outside of her body, and in that gained acquaintance she'd discovered something beyond belonging - something like home. Or, rather, a person who re-defined what a safe place could be, who filled her empty shadow with the sharp lines and curves of visceral beauty and life.

Clarke met Lexa's steady gaze with pooling eyes, and she didn't miss the other girl's slight intake of breath at the raw emotion clearly present in the depths of a thousand oceans. The blonde didn't miss how the Commander's hand shook a little as she drew her blade across pale flesh, Titus muttering quietly the entire time. As Clarke's blood began to drip onto the stage, Lexa allowed her mask to slip away for a fleeting moment as everything else seemed to fall away, leaving the two girls locked in a weighted gaze - one that spoke as many words as their souls would allow, cycling a fiery passion through the other's veins as their hearts beat in unison to a sacred and private rhythm.
As Titus finished his mumblings - and right before Lexa forced herself to tear her gaze away from Clarke - the blonde managed to catch the girl's eyes one last time as she mouthed a single word:

"Yours."

It was as if Clarke had reached out and struck Lexa, the girl's reaction so noticeable that the blonde's heart thudded nervously in her chest, afraid of what it might mean should her subjects notice. The Commander took a slight step back, her eyes widening and her lips parting in surprise as she inhaled a sharp breath - as if she was watching the very pieces of the sky splinter apart and fall to her feet in one instance. Everything about her expression suggested that Clarke's utterance was the very last thing she expected to hear, and it took Titus placing a subtle hand on the small of the girl's back to get her to collect herself and move on.

Though she still looked as if she wanted to say something in response, throwing frequent glances back at the blonde as she continued across the stage, the Commander was able to finish the ritual with a steady level of composure deftly maintained by her stoic mask.

After finishing with Wells, the Commander moved behind the kneeling Skaikru to get closer to the crowd and give her final address - clearly just as powerful as her opening monologue.

With a delighted and deafening roar, the crowd began to disperse at the speech's conclusion and music began to co-mingle with the buzzing cacophony of sound once more. Clarke and her friends knew this was their final cue of the evening, and they made their way off the stage without preamble, leaving the Commander and her generals to stare after the group as a handmaiden met them at the bottom of the steps.

Clarke tried not to think about the fact that she felt a certain pair of green eyes boring into her back the entire time she descended the steps, very obviously avoiding said girl's gaze as she made her way into the large crowd.

For the second time in her life, Clarke found herself very drunk - though much more comfortably so than the previous time.
She had made her way back to the marketplace at the base of the tower and watched from a bench off to the side as the people of Polis danced, drank, ate, and all-around had a damn good time celebrating the *Skaikru* - though Clarke ventured to guess that they'd take advantage of any opportunity to live in excess that was presented to them.

She watched as Bellamy danced sensually with a beautiful girl with gorgeous dark skin and elaborate braids, Raven not far behind him dancing solo and spinning around in circles as beer sloshed out of the mug in her hand.

Jax spun around the makeshift dance floor in earnest with a giddy Isa secured in his arms, and Clarke watched them fondly before turning her gaze to Lincoln and Octavia at the edge of the crowd. With a secret smile, Clarke observed the pair sharing a seemingly intimate exchange across the market from her, oblivious to the loud din of the celebration - almost as if they were the only two people in the city at the moment.

Clarke was quite familiar with the feeling.

The more alcohol she consumed, the more she found her eyes wandering about the crowd in search of a certain brunette who she'd so willingly pledged her loyalty to in front of thousands of expectant stares. She hadn't seen Lexa since she'd made her way from the arena, and Clarke found that she was a little nervous to face the other girl after her heavy admission of sorts. Her foggy brain was cycling mantras of insecurity and self-doubt through her mind, and she didn't possess the cognizance to fully rid herself of their weighted implications.

What if she'd spoken too soon? What if Lexa wasn't ready to accept such intimate devotion after the loss of her past lover? What if - ?

Her increasingly frantic thoughts were cut mercifully short by the sudden appearance of Wells at her side, the injured boy sinking down delicately beside her, a bottle of beer in his hand. He fixed her with a knowing look, clearly having witnessed her spiraling from afar.

He simply knew her too well.

"Penny for your thoughts?" he inquired softly, raising an eyebrow in an otherwise sympathetic expression. Clarke sighed, allowing her shoulders to slump a little as she rested her elbows on her knees and propped her chin on her closed fists.

Her head swam through somewhat of a dangerous mixture.
"I thought that if I physically distanced myself from the party then maybe I wouldn't ruin it," Clarke chuckled, shaking her head a little. Wells narrowed his eyes a little in concern, silently encouraging her to elaborate. In her drunkenness, she obliged.

"As you probably know, I haven't been in the...best of moods lately," she continued slowly, expression contorting in displeasure as she did a quick once-over of his injuries - the tangible result of her instability. He pursed his lips in a symbolic gesture of argument but stayed silent.

"I just... I feel so many - so much...stuff, Wells. Just really shitty stuff, you know? I can't really put it into words..."

Wells nodded in understanding, expression pensive as he turned to gaze out over the crowd.

"I'm guessing it has something to do with your mom, right?" he spoke quietly, still not looking at Clarke. She looked away from his profile to observe the crowd as well, feeling wholly separated from the scene - almost as if she were a miserable voyeur observing from the wings.

"Yes... and no, actually," Clarke answered just as quietly, pursing her lips for a moment. "It's a lot more than that, to be honest... I mean, I think about what she did almost constantly, but... I dunno, Wells. It's hard to explain... Am I making any sense? I promise I'm trying to be coherent over here."

Wells chuckled softly in her periphery, the sweet sound immediately swallowed up by the much louder din around them.

"Yeah, I gotcha, Clarke. We've known each other a pretty long time, remember?" he spoke quietly, still not looking at Clarke.

"Besides, I'm right there with you, if I'm being honest...," he trailed off, lowering his gaze to the ground as his expression became indiscernible to Clarke's right.

"Our parents are supposed to be the ones we lean on, you know? The ones who love us the most through all of it - the ones who don't get to pick and choose when it's convenient to be there for us. And yet..." Wells trailed off again, clearly struggling to swallow the emotions threatening to bubble over to the surface.

"It's been hitting me more and more every day that my dad hasn't been there for me once in my life - not when it really mattered, at least. He made appearances when he had to, showed support when he was obligated, but that was all he every did, really - acted as the father he knew he was supposed to be. He never actually was... And now..."
Wells gulped, face suddenly contorting in barely-concealed rage that surprised Clarke with its intensity.

"Now, he's managed to become the one person in existence that I truly despise. Out of everyone on this planet and above it, he's it - he's the person I hate... My own fucking dad..."

Clarke closed her eyes, feeling an overwhelming sense of heartache and helplessness swim to the surface of the maelstrom within her mind. What could she say to him? What was there to say?

"I just...I don't know if I wanna cry about it, scream at someone, or punch a wall somewhere," Wells sighed, shoulders slumping in defeat - much like Clarke's had not long before.

Clarke nodded, immediately understanding.

"I think I'm done crying," she stated suddenly, surprising both herself and Wells with the amount of steel in her voice.

As soon as she'd said it, it was as if every fiber in her being hummed an instant sound of agreement and affirmation.

"Not that I think it's necessarily a bad response when shit hits the fan, mind you. I just... I'm done with it. It's gotten me nowhere up to this point, you know? I think I need to find another outlet - another way to get everything out without giving myself a headache and smearing every sketch I try to draw in the process." Wells laughed at that, nodding his agreement with a bit of chagrin.

They met each other's gazes again and shared small smiles filled with ancient sadness and impossible understanding - the epitome of commiseration.

"As long as that outlet doesn't require using me as a punching bag, I'll support you wholeheartedly," Wells asserted with a smirk. Clarke shoved his shoulder playfully, feeling immediate gratitude at being able to confide in her oldest friend in this moment.

"I'll try to keep that in mind," she responded lightly, grinning crookedly as Wells chuckled softly.
The air suddenly seemed a bit lighter, the sounds less menacing.

Clarke would find her strength somehow, some way. She didn't have to continue allowing her life to be defined by the bad moments, the rough patches. She was more than capable of getting herself to the precipice of clarity, the peak of peace - all she had to do was get out of her own way.

Everything was going to be okay. It would have to be...

Before either one could say anything else, both of their attention was drawn to the sight of the Commander and her generals making their way through the dancing crowd, all of whom parted to allow their leader to pass.

Clarke's heart began to pound in earnest as her neck pricked with the intense desire to run over to Lexa and throw her arms around the girl who was starting to equate to every good thing in her world. The blonde watched as the Commander subtly scanned the crowd from the fringes, clearly searching for something - or someone...

Suddenly, Clarke had an idea.

She quickly excused herself from Wells before making sure to catch the searching girl's gaze, smiling inwardly when green eyes locked on to her standing figure and followed the blonde's every movements as if Clarke was the flame, and she but a helpless moth drawn to its intoxicating warmth and light.

Silently hoping Lexa would catch onto context clues, Clarke threw the girl a crooked smile across the crowd and turned on her heels to disappear down a much quieter side street surprisingly devoid of people. She walked a short distance down the street, scanning empty shops and tents for her destination.

Finally coming upon what she was looking for, Clarke darted off into an alleyway to her left and ducked into an old abandoned shack that was essentially hidden from view in an odd place behind some other shops. She never would've known about it had a certain brunette not pointed the place out to her some time ago, speaking of its rich history as a former textile shop when Polis was first formed.

For the first time in her life, Clarke sincerely hoped she'd been followed...
It felt like hours passed while she hid just inside the doorway of the empty wooden shack, anxiously
toying with her thumbs as she leaned back against the wall. Just as she was about to give up and
head back to the tower in defeat, she heard the quietest of footsteps padding down the cobblestone
path towards the shack.

Her heart immediately thudded into a pounding that resounded throughout her entire body, every
nerve-ending seemingly awake at the prospect of what she was about to do.

"Clarke?"

The sweetest of whispers - full of uncertainty and something else - floated to the blonde's ears as the
Commander stepped through the threshold.

The brunette didn't even have time to turn and look in Clarke's direction before the blonde in
question grabbed the girl's left wrist and spun her around, pulling the other girl into her body and
crashing their lips together as her other hand knotted in silky locks.

The initial moment of surprise and alarm immediately forgotten, Lexa reciprocated instantly,
moaning into Clarke's mouth as the blonde fit their bodies together like puzzle pieces. One of Lexa's
hands went to the small of Clarke's back, bringing her as close as their anatomy would allow, while
the other loped into intricately braided blonde hair.

Suddenly, Clarke felt herself being all-but-slammed into the wall as Lexa became a being of pure
desire in her grasp - as if every silent word and unspoken glance was fueling a fire that coursed
through her veins like relentless rapids. It was Clarke's turn to moan as Lexa detached their lips and
began a skilled assault across her jawline and down her neck, making erotic work of her pulse point
as her hands began to roam over the blonde's curves. Clarke moved one hand from Lexa's hair to
stroke down the girl's back and over her hips, hesitating for a moment as she felt herself consumed in
a mess of moans and desperate whimpers under Lexa's continued assault.

Seemingly feeling the need to be everywhere at once, Lexa moved back to Clarke's lips and latched
on, sucking the blonde's bottom lip into her mouth slightly to nibble at it playfully - a move which
had Clarke's knees positively wobbling beneath her.

Lexa's tongue sought permission against Clarke's lips and the blonde happily obliged, allowing the
other girl to lick into her mouth with an amazing mixture of tenderness and raw passion.

It was truly amazing how Clarke could feel every single emotion the other girl desired her to, Lexa
seemingly using her position beside the blonde's heart to her advantage.
Feeling emboldened by the heat of their exchange, Clarke slid her hands lower to grab onto Lexa's ass, causing the older girl to gasp into her mouth in appreciative surprise. The blonde used her grip as leverage to get Lexa as close to her as possible, and the Commander seemed to find the position to her liking, as well, moving so that her right leg was slightly wedged between both of Clarke's.

Clarke moaned embarrassingly loudly as Lexa's thigh pressed up against the one place she currently needed the other girl the most, and she subconsciously began a slow and steady grind on the brunette's leg now so conveniently placed. This elicited a delicious moan from Lexa, as well, the brunette moving her hands to grip onto Clarke's hips as she encouraged the blonde's movements to meet her own subtle thrusts.

In the back of Clarke's mind, she knew they should've stopped by now. They normally would have, for all intents and purposes. But now...

Now, Clarke was grinding purposefully against Lexa's leg, both hands knotted in brunette locks as her breaths came out in short gasps between sloppy kisses. Lexa seemed to be unraveling just as quickly, her hands needing to be everywhere and nowhere at once, trembling in every possible way with visceral anticipation as she worshipped the girl in her grasp.

Every cell in Clarke's body was screaming at her to allow Lexa to throw her on the floor and ravage her in every conceivable way, but that thought also brought her up short...

Would she really be okay with their first time being on the floor or up against the wall of one of the most decrepit shacks in Polis? On top of it all, how would she feel if she knew she'd sprung on Lexa in her drunken state and used her...feminine wiles to coax the girl into making love despite her vocalized reservations?

She wanted this - god, she really fucking did... But, right here - right now - didn't seem like the moment, as fleeting as it was...

"Lex," Clarke gasped, detaching their lips and stopping her ministrations to pull back and look at the girl. What she saw nearly caused another moan to tear from her throat.

Lexa's eyes were black, not even a hint of emerald present in the irises totally consumed by desire. Her war paint was smudged a little, her lips kiss-swollen and parted as her breaths came out in short gasps - much like Clarke's. To her credit, though, the brunette's expression went from pure hunger and wanton need to muted desire within seconds, closing her eyes for a moment to regain her composure.
Clarke leaned back in and placed chaste kisses down the girl's sharp jawline and exposed neck as Lexa continued to breath through her hormones.

"You're not helping much, Clarke," she rasped quietly, her voice rough with raw passion that made sharp want pool in the blonde's stomach - and elsewhere...

Clarke staved her body's reaction off by stilling her movements, instead electing to tuck her face into the other girl's neck and wrap her arms tightly around Lexa's waist. The brunette immediately responded, one hand moving to a protective hold on the back of the blonde's head and the other wrapping around to secure Clarke as tightly to her as possible, humming softly in contentment at their position.

They stood there for infinite moments, allowing the peacefulness found in the other's presence to help calm their body's more carnal reactions to each other. Lexa had taken to rubbing soothing circles into Clarke's back - something she'd begun to do out of instinct, it seemed - as the blonde nuzzled further into her neck, comfortably secure in her happy place.

"You look absolutely stunning tonight, Clarke, I - " Clarke felt Lexa swallow harshly as she seemed to choke on her words, suddenly overwhelmed with the need to say everything at once but not having the physical capability to do so.

"I've never felt - you're just... Knowing that you're one of my people, that you're - that I can protect you without being questioned now... I just..."

Lexa seemed to be at a loss for words for the first time in perhaps her entire life, and Clarke smiled to herself as she formulated a way to rescue the other girl from her stumbling train of thought.

Pulling back to lock eyes with the girl rendered so incredibly awe-struck and vulnerable before her, Clarke allowed a sweet smile to stretch across her features as her eyes became half-lidded with impossible tenderness. Lexa's lips parted at the raw emotion Clarke showed for her.

"I meant what I said on that stage, Lex," Clarke whispered softly, voice trembling slightly with the depth of her emotion. "I'm yours - now, and for however long you want me to be... Whatever you want me to be, I'll be that for you - whatever you want me to do... I'll just.. I'll follow you anywhere, Lexa. Always."

Clarke expected a number of responses to her sappy display - a soft smile, a chaste kiss, a warm hug
- but, once again, she found herself taken by surprise...

With tears welling in her eyes and a look on her face that spoke of the discovery of every wonder in the universe having converged into one place for her eyes alone, Lexa sunk to her knees, taking both of Clarke's hands in her own.

She looked up into Clarke's eyes as if the blonde had actually created those wonders, as if every marvel in existence had been crafted by pale hands and overseen by cerulean eyes filled with the depths of oceans at high tide.

Simply put, Lexa looked at Clarke as if she were the focal point of her universe - as if every good thing in her life originated from and was contingent upon the blonde's presence in her life -, and Clarke was able to discern every fleeting desire of a soul now unburdened by the expansive depths of tenderness and utter devotion that had taken hold of it.

"I swear fealty to you, Klark Kom Skaikru," Lexa began, voice surprisingly firm despite the tears now freely streaming down her cheeks, reflecting Clarke's own.

"I vow to treat your needs as my own, and your people as my people... You honor me, Clarke, a-and... I am yours. Otaim..."

With a sound somewhere between a sob and something like pure delight, Clarke pulled Lexa to her feet and crashed their lips together once more, the kiss morphing into a worshipful game of push-and-pull, of fire and tides...

I love you, I love you, I love you...

After an eternity of unspoken vows and promises shared through the touch of lips and the brush of skin, Lexa pulled back to cup Clarke's face with both hands, scanning the blonde's face with uninhibited adoration. Moments passed while emeralds memorized every curve and angle, Clarke staring dreamily back into the ethereal face of her love. Finally, Lexa seemed to come to some sort of decision, even nodding a little to herself.

"I'm afraid I must get back to the celebration, as I only just managed to slip away in the first place...," she trailed off, momentarily displeased with her predicament before she remembered the direction of her statement. "But, I planned on retiring shortly anyways, and I was wondering - well, I was hoping - " Lexa cut herself off with a gulp, suddenly looking more unsure of herself than Clarke had ever seen her.
The blonde moved her hands to link behind Lexa's neck, coaxing her to continue with a sweet peck to the tip of the brunette's nose that caused the other girl to noticeably shiver. Clarke nodded, expression wholly understanding and encouraging.

Lexa seemed to get lost in the depths of oceans for a moment, lips parted slightly as wonder overtook her expression not for the first time this evening. She shook herself out of it quickly, though, moving to trace Clarke's bottom lip with her left thumb as her other hand rested on the small of the blonde's back.

She finally cleared her throat, seemingly steeling herself to continue.

"Well... I was hoping you would... Would you join me in my room in an hour? I have something I'd like to show you..." The raw vulnerability and uncertainty had Clarke's heart aching in her chest, her stomach flipping end-over-end as her brain considered what the request might entail...

"Of course, Lexa," Clarke responded immediately, not wanting to prolong the girl's obvious suffering any longer. Lexa seemed to immediately deflate with relief, surging forward to place a grateful kiss on Clarke's lips before stepping back.

She moved to grasp both of the blonde's hands in hers for a moment, a plethora of emotions flitting across her expression at an impossible rate, her eyes filled with nameless comets...

"Until then, ai hodnes..." Lexa promised softly, lifting Clarke's right hand to her lips to place a chaste kiss on the blonde's knuckles before releasing her hands and turning to stride out of the shack door with newfound purpose.

Simply put, Clarke was overwhelmed.

The fact that the Commander of 12 Clans and the most revered - and borderline-worshipped - leader she'd ever met had just bowed and sworn fealty to her in an old shack located in the most random place in Polis was almost too much for Clarke to comprehend. The dichotomy of it all almost made it impossible to believe, and the blonde felt that she needed to take a moment to absorb everything before she could even begin to process any of it.

If someone had told her a year ago that she'd be sent to the ground - a place she'd previously believed to be uninhabited - to be wrapped up in the culture of a surviving people lead by the strongest woman she'd ever met - the same woman she now found herself head-over-heels for -, she would've
laughed in their face for hours, beyond amused by such a preposterous imagining.

But, despite all odds, here she was - on the ground, nearly recovered from her initial injuries, sworn into subservience to another culture and leader by blood oath, and hopelessly devoted to the most unexpected conjuring of her wandering heart...

What an adventure life could be.

Finally having collected herself enough to walk again, Clarke made her way from the shack and headed in the direction of the tower, feeling as if she was floating above the dusting of stars glistening in the dark night sky with the lightness of her ecstasy.

Before she'd made her way back to the first side street, though, she was stopped in her tracks by the distant sound of clanging metal-on-metal.

Clarke furrowed her brows in confusion as the sound seemed to grow louder off to her left, and she found her feet moving toward the source without her mind having consciously granted permission to do so.

As the sound grew louder the further she went, Clarke became aware of what sounded like a male voice yelling at the top of his lungs in apparent distress.

Without a second thought, Clarke bolted towards the sound, allowing her feet to guide her through random streets and alleyways as she got further and further from the celebration at the center of the city.

Out of breath and significantly sobered by the intensity of her alarm, Clarke came to an abrupt stop in front of a large wooden door hidden on the outer wall that she would've missed had she not been running so closely along its length. The screaming was exceptionally loud now, and the metal clanging was grating to her ears as it scraped against a hard surface at an erratic rate.

Once again without thought, Clarke threw the door open and allowed her eyes to adjust to the sudden darkness of a stairwell leading down into what looked like a bottomless abyss.

Her heart pounding in her ears and her vision swimming slightly, Clarke left the door cracked open to allow a sliver of light to shine a path to the bottom of the stairwell. With more hesitation now, Clarke began to descend, hurtling towards the conclusion of where she was with uneasy conviction.
About halfway down the stairs, the light from the cracked door became no more and Clarke was forced to press herself to the cold stone wall to guide her the rest of the way down. Had it not been for the constant screaming and clanging, Clarke might've begun to panic at the thought of being deprived of her vision. As it were, though, the auditory stimulation was enough to keep her from hyperventilating at her sensory loss in the darkness.

After far too long for Clarke's liking, she finally came to the bottom of the stairwell and was greeted by the dim light of torches barely burning along a narrow corridor leading straight ahead of her. Gulping back the last shreds of her fear and hesitation, Clarke squared her shoulders and walked straight ahead, taking note of the empty barred-off cells to her left and right at evenly-spaced intervals.

Clarke had been right in her earlier conclusion - she'd finally found the dungeons. This meant that the screaming man could be none other than...

"Prince Roan of Azgeda," Clarke stated, tone cold and bereft as she came to a stop in front of the sixth cell on the left.

The screaming and clanging immediately stopped, the source of the horrible sounds whipping around from his place against the back wall of the cell to meet Clarke's gaze with wild eyes.

The blonde watched as a number of emotions flitted across the distraught man's features in the dim light - fear, alarm, confusion, anger, recognition, and, finally, smugness.

He squared his shoulder back much like Clarke had done moments before and began a slow prowl towards the bars of his cell where the carefully passive blonde stood on the other side.

Clarke took note of the tattered shreds of fabric adorning his frame that she believed to be much more slight than the last time she'd seen him. His eyes were hollowed out by circles nearly purpled in their severity, his wrists bloody and raw from having worked so viciously against their chains. Other than that, though, he looked relatively well and unharmed.

Clarke was exceptionally surprised.

"Well, well, well," the prince drawled, voice raspy and far less intimidating than Clarke knew he'd probably intended it to be. "Are my eyes deceiving me, or am I finally being graced with the presence of the legendary golden-haired skai prisa that everyone is so nuts about?"

Clarke didn't respond, simply raising her chin slightly in a gesture of defiance. That seemed to be
enough for Roan, and he cracked a cocky grin as he stopped roughly five feet from Clarke on the 
other side of the bars.

"I'm honored. Truly," he deadpanned, meeting her gaze with a raised eyebrow that made Clarke's 
skin crawl. "Now, tell me - what is it that a princess such as yourself could be wanting from the likes 
of me? A little risky to come on your own, don't you think?"

The threatening undercurrent in his tone was not lost on Clarke, and she clenched her jaw against the 
urge to reach through the bars and smack the cocky grin off his face.

A thought suddenly struck her.

"Where are your guards?" she inquired flatly, scanning subtly around her for any sign of life.

Nothing. They were the only two living souls in the entire dungeon, it seemed.

Roan's smile only grew.

"Is someone a little worried all of a sudden?" he teased, clearly trying to get a rise out of her. Clarke 
wouldn't take the bate, though, simply steeling herself further - much to the prince's dismay - and 
meeting his gaze with impossible calmness.

He sighed after a moment, shaking his head a little as he shifted his gaze from the blonde.

"They're all at the celebration - figured I couldn't do much damage chained to the wall in iron 
shackles," Roan answered finally, jiggling the shackles around every limb of his body for emphasis. 
He then rubbed a hand down his face in a gesture of utter exhaustion, and Clarke could've almost felt 
a twinge of sympathy for him in that small moment.

Almost.

"But, you never answered my question," he continued after a beat, meeting her gaze once more with 
genuine curiosity now peeking through the haughtiness. "Why are you here? Shouldn't you be 
celebrating with everyone else or something? It's your party, after all."
Clarke found that she appreciated his bluntness much more than his typical way of dancing around statements.

Two could much more skillfully play at this straightforward game.

"In TonDC, you asked the Commander about me - said your queen had questions, as well. Why? What do you want? What does she want?" Roan's brow furrowed for a moment, seemingly taken back to that terrible day when the Reapers had swarmed the small contingent of the Grounder army for a moment.

He tilted his head a little bit as if to size the blonde up.

"You're full of questions, aren't you?"

"I could say the same thing about you," Clarke fired back immediately, crossing her arms in front of her and leveling a challenging stare at the man.

That haunting grin returned to his face once more before he broke into a fit of hysterical laughter unbefitting of a prince - or any other sane human being, for that matter.

Clarke found it utterly unnerving.

After a few more moments of uncontrollable hysterics, Roan finally composed himself enough to stare back at Clarke with a devious smile on his face that caused the blonde's stomach to churn more uneasily than before.

"I was right," he finally spoke, sounding almost uncharacteristically giddy in the wake of his chilling hysterics. "You're perfect."

Clarke furrowed her brows at that, narrowing her eyes as she clenched her jaw impossibly harder.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" she challenged hotly, taking an unconscious step closer to
the prince as he did the same.

They were mere feet from each other now, the metal bars the only thing keeping them from launching at each other.

The air prickled between them like thousands of tiny needles prepared to plunge into their skin and nail them to the floor on both sides of the bars.

Roan's next words sent chills down Clarke's spine and caused her heart to plummet beneath the depths of her core:

"I have many plans for you, skai prisa... It's only a matter of time now."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was gonna be a monster if I didn't split it up, so sorry for the tiny cliffhanger of sorts...

Out of curiosity, if I were to potentially attempt to write my version of smut in the near or distant future, how on-board with that would y'all be??

Other than that, I'd love to hear your thoughts on this one!! Things are gonna start speeding up a lil bit coming up, so I hope you stick around...(;
The questions cycling frantically through her mind distracted her so thoroughly that it took her
bumping into the back of some random man - far too drunk to still be standing, it seemed - upon re-entering the marketplace to get her to halfway snap out of her trance. Clarke mumbled generalized apologies as she distractedly weaving her way through the rest of the crowd, heading into the main entrance of the tower without so much as a glance in the general direction of her friends.

She really couldn't think about them right now.

As she made her way into the elevator - still not really comprehending much of her surroundings -, she vaguely remembered her promise to meet Lexa in her room not too long from now...

Could she keep her encounter with the prince a secret? Was it right for her to? She'd known the moment she'd descended the steps to the dungeon that she was forbidden from doing such a thing, but her curiosity always was one of the heavier burdens she chose to bear...

The thought of facing the one person who knew her better than anyone else did with the weight of her stolen conversation pressing down on her caused her stomach to jumble into a tight knot. A wave of nausea hit her so powerfully that she immediately burst from the elevator the second she reached her floor and sprinted towards her bathroom, uncaring about the curious stares of the guards at her door. She barely made it to hunch over the toilet before she rid herself of a mixture of alcohol and anxiety, clutching at her abdomen as she heaved painfully.

What was she doing? Since when did keeping secrets from Lexa ever get her anywhere good? She had to tell her - if not for the sake of confiding in her love, then out of respect for the Commander's current predicament in regards to Azgeda. Clarke simply had to confess...

But, maybe not tonight.

No, tonight was a celebration, a time for happiness - for peace. She couldn't bring the burdens of more potential threats down upon the one person whose shoulders most likely ached from having to carry them all without even a whisper of complaint. She wouldn't.

Tonight, she'd allow Lexa to show her another piece of herself and do her best to convey just how honored she was to be privileged enough to know the other girl in such a way - to show Lexa just how special she'd become to Clarke.

Nothing could take that away from either of them tonight; Clarke wouldn't allow it.

Steeling herself as best as possible, Clarke stood from the toilet and walked over to the wide mirror
above her bathroom vanity, carefully cleansing herself of any evidence of the physical display of the chaos rattling within her mind. Her outward appearance seemed to be the only aspect of her life relatively within the confines of her control right now, and Clarke relished in the moments in which she was able to exercise control over that which was solely hers.

Somewhat satisfied with having returned herself to three-quarters of the woman she'd been when she'd emerged from the tower hours before, Clarke made her way from her room and down the hall to the Commander's quarters - not before stopping to pick her sketchbook and pencils up off of her bedside table, though.

Feeling more presumptuous than she ever had in her life - though no longer emboldened by the alcohol now freed from her system -, Clarke opened the door to the Commander's room without even a glance in the guards' direction, figuring they'd have been alerted to her impending visit at this late hour. (Absently, she wondered what they might think of their Heda hosting someone in her room at such an hour, but she supposed they'd probably learned not to question their leader at this point - if only out of unflinching loyalty to her.)

Clarke quietly shut the door behind her and allowed herself to gape in the doorway of Lexa's room for a moment, taking in the sight of the girl's large four-poster bed covered in luscious furs positioned against the right wall ahead of the door, the couch and chair surrounding a small table off to the left in front of the largest window in the huge room. The wall against the outside of the tower was made of some sort of elaborately designed wooden piece that acted as both a window to the outside and a partition that Clarke assumed led to Lexa's bathroom.

Moonlight streamed in from both the open window and the wall piece, and Clarke was momentarily mesmerized by the fabulous shapes created by the soft light being refracted through the designs of the wall.

It had a strange calming effect on her, and she slowly walked over to the large window, placing her sketchbook beneath her armpit to gaze out over the still-buzzing city. A small smile danced across her lips as she took in the sight of the celebration still very much in full-force down below, the sounds of music and laughter wafting up to her like the sweetest of symphonies.

This was how human beings were supposed to be: not soldiers of strife and heartache, but agents of life and ecstasy, beings who belonged to something bigger and felt the need to celebrate that belonging at all times. This was what life was supposed to be. This was what it could be for all of them - not just the ones currently on the ground.

How could she make sure that those who still orbited the planet in a state of misery and terror got to experience the same vitality this lifestyle could offer them? How could a single person ever do that for them?
How is it that *Lexa* had done this for her people without the Arkers ever knowing such a way of life existed? The implications of such a lack of knowledge left a thorough sense of discontent in the blonde's heart, and she felt truly disheartened by the thought that some of her people might never get to experience what it was like to be ruled by a leader who wanted what was best for her people at all times - who actually *cared*...

Once again, Clarke found herself rendered utterly awe-struck by the girl whose very existence provided her with more vitality than any one way of life ever could, whose soul contained an imperfect sort of purity that provided more solace than even the most righteous of saints could boast to their followers.

Suddenly feeling inspired and oddly comforted by the mere thought of the girl who'd stolen her heart many moons ago and provided it a much safer home, Clarke moved to situate herself on the window ledge, propping her sketchbook comfortably in her lap and placing pencil to paper in the hopes of capturing the hidden face of the man in the moon.

It could've been days later when Clarke heard the soft click of the bedroom door opening somewhere behind her.

She was too engrossed in her sketch to hear the sharp intake of breath as Lexa spotted the blonde perched on her windowsill, and was thoroughly taken by surprise when deft arms wrapped around her waist and pulled her from the ledge not moments later.

The familiarity of the situation struck Clarke as incredibly humorous for some reason, and she immediately succumbed to a fit of giggles the moment Lexa spun her around to fix her with an overly stern expression.

"What've I said about hanging out of the windows like that, Clarke?" the brunette questioned, worry plainly evident in a voice clearly intended to sound exasperated.

Her eyes widened in concern when she noticed Clarke's hysterics only increase, but her next bout of doubtless reprimanding was interrupted by the press of Clarke's lips against her own, fingers entwining in her intricate braids as they dropped the sketchbook and pencil to the floor with carelessness.
With a sound of something like defeat morphing into contentment in the back of her throat, Lexa immediately threw aside her scolding to wrap Clarke in a tender embrace as she returned the kiss with equal fervor.

After a beat, Clarke detached their lips to lean her forehead against Lexa's, smiling smugly when the brunette made a sound of displeasure in the back of her throat and attempted to chase the blonde's lips back to her own.

"You worry too much, Commander," Clarke teased huskily, avoiding the other girl's needy quest for her lips by moving to place sensual kisses across the girl's jawline and down her neck.

Lexa stilled instantly beneath Clarke's lips, moaning deep within her throat as she subconsciously brought the blonde closer to her. Clarke smirked against the skin above the girl's pulse point, pleased to be able to affect her in such a way.

"Now," Clarke spoke quietly between kisses, "what is it you wanted to show me?"

She sucked lightly on the sensitive skin, and delighted in Lexa's full-bodied shudder as the girl moaned quite audibly, moving to grasp somewhat desperately onto Clarke's shoulders in the attempt to ground herself. Clarke simply smiled against Lexa's bare skin, nipping and licking playfully while the girl in her grasp struggled not to fall apart completely beneath her touch. Her hands had begun to wander from Lexa's hair, stroking suggestively down her back and stopping to grasp onto the girl's hips as she leaned back to inspect the product of her handiwork.

To put it simply, Lexa looked beyond flustered.

Her kiss-swollen lips were parted as her breaths came out short and staggered, her gorgeous irises completely overtaken by pupils blown wide with raw desire. Clarke was pleased to have discovered something that aroused Lexa so, and she made a mental note to store this knowledge away for a later time...

Clarke raised a somewhat cocky eyebrow as she waited for the usually-collected Commander to piece herself back together. After a beat, Lexa moved her hands from their grip on Clarke's shoulders to cup the blonde's cheeks, lips pulling up into a wry smile as she shook her head a little, completely in awe of the girl whose face she sought to memorize.

"What are you trying to do to me, Clarke?" she whispered reverently, more to herself than to the girl
in question. Clarke simply grinned in response.

At this, Lexa seemed to remember the task at hand, shaking herself out of her trance to grip Clarke by the hand and pull her around the four-poster bed to stop in front of the wall by the door.

All smugness was immediately staunched from Clarke's expression as she watched the wall begin to move and pull away to the left, revealing a hidden bookcase overflowing with ancient-looking texts. Clarke turned to gape at Lexa who had looked away from her to fool with whatever secret lever had activated the movement. Though relatively simple and easy to understand, logistically, the technology that allowed the bookshelf to move in such a way still had Clarke marveling at its ingenuity.

Seemingly in her own world, Lexa began to rifle through the various stacks of books and overflowing segments of parchment on the middle shelf. She'd let go of Clarke's hand moments before to more easily rummage through the piles, and the blonde felt a twinge at the loss of contact, as ridiculous as it was.

"When I was going through one of our oldest historical archives in the main library the other day," Lexa began, voice slightly muffled as she bent down to search the lower shelves, "I found something I thought you might like, and I brought it back here for safe-keeping... I can't seem to remember where I - here!"

The Commander straightened in an instant, turning to face Clarke again with a hardback book in her hands. The girl's expression was as excited - and surprisingly nervous - as the blonde had ever seen it before, and Clarke found her heart fluttering to an uneven rhythm at the amount of affection currently blossoming within her for the beautiful girl in front of her.

Lexa carefully placed the book in Clarke's hands, eyebrows slightly raised as she quickly scanned the blonde's face for her reaction. Clarke turned the copy over in her hands, stroking the spine gently as she appraised its condition. It had no title, and Clarke furrowed her eyebrows a little as she opened the book to the first page and began to slowly flip through it.

It was filled with drawings - pencil sketches, much like the ones she kept in her own notebook.

The first picture depicted what Clarke believed to be Times Square in New York City before the bombings, teeming with life to the point of gross overcrowding. The next few sketches were all quite similar - snapshots of life in the city before the end, immortalized on the old pages for all to see. Not a quarter of the way into the book, though, one particular sketch caught her eye, and Clarke found herself completely engrossed in the book, all but forgetting Lexa's presence.

In the drawing, a group of five people were standing on a hillside overlooking a large valley, watching as a nuclear bomb formed a mushroom cloud over a civilization many miles off in the distance. Utterly confused, Clarke quickly flipped to the next page and was startled to find another
very similar drawing; the same five people with their backs turned, watching from a great distance as a bomb obliterated what looked to be a much larger city this time - though, which city it was, Clarke had no idea.

The drawing on the other side of the page was much the same, and Clarke began to feel a bit of strange anxiety prickling at the back of her neck as she rifled through the rest of the pages. Over thirty drawings of much the same scene; five people watching from a distance as various major cities of the old world were violently erased from existence before their eyes, their faces never once displayed by the artist.

It was the final drawing that had Clarke nearly loosing an audible gasp, though:

Taking up two whole pages with immense detail, those same five people were drawn with their backs turned to the artist on the left page, this time overlooking a valley drenched in what appeared to be rivers of blood that extended onto the second page. In the valley, hordes of dismembered corpses were littered everywhere amongst the shambles of ruins, depicted in their final state with graphic detail that made Clarke's stomach churn uncomfortably. One lone female figure was drawn in the bottom right corner of the page facing the figures on the hill, her features indiscernible due to her distance from the group as well as the fact that she appeared to be covered in some sort of black tar.

All in all, the whole scene left Clarke surprisingly disturbed.

She looked up to meet Lexa's expectant gaze feeling a bit cold all of a sudden.

"Wh-what is this, Lexa?" she asked quietly, voice trembling slightly.

Upon seeing Clarke's negative reaction, Lexa's face immediately fell, expression screwing up into one of concerned confusion as she stepped close enough to the blonde that the other side of the book pressed into her stomach. She placed her hands over Clarke's where they gripped the sides of the book, white-knuckled.

"It is one of many depictions of our history - a drawn version of our folklore, one might say," the girl answered just as quietly, furrowing her brows as she fixed Clarke with an immensely concerned expression now - though the blonde could see traces of hurt beginning to poke their way through. "I thought... Well, I know how much you love these kinds of drawings, and I just - "

She cut herself off, swallowing audibly as she struggled to find the right words.

"I wanted to give you a piece of our history, to know more about the people whose legacy is now your own... I-I'm sorry if it - I didn't think it would bother you so..."
As she trailed off, Clarke watched Lexa look around the room as if suddenly desperate for a way to take back her gift, a way to change the subject somehow - to bring the blonde back to her earlier flirtatious happiness.

Clarke's heart lurched for her in that moment.

"Lexa," she spoke up, interrupting the girl's desperate search as she closed the book between them, stepping back to place it on the bed before she turned to face the Commander once more.

Lexa's eyes immediately snapped back to hers, and the apprehensive look swimming beneath the emeralds nearly brought tears to Clarke's eyes - as if the other girl expected some sort of rejection at any moment now.

She stepped forward to cup Lexa's cheeks delicately in her palms, running her right thumb along the girl's jawline as she attempted to put as much tender reassurance into her expression as possible.

"The book is wonderful, really. The pictures are so vivid - so real... It just - " Clarke swallowed, struggling to find her words as Lexa seemed to stare into the depths of her being, her gaze so incredibly intense. "It got to me more than I expected it to, you know? I've never seen anything like it before, and... I dunno. It just hits close to home, I guess."

Lexa was now gripping on to both of Clarke's wrists, eyes relentlessly scanning the blonde's face for everything it had to offer - which, in this moment, was simply the purest form of sincerity and a special fondness reserved only for her.

"I'm honored that you'd want to share a piece of your history with me, and I can't wait to look at it more closely somewhere where the only light source isn't just candles." She smirked at Lexa now, attempting to bring them back to the playful place they'd thrived in not too long ago.

It seemed to work, as Lexa immediately blushed a little at that, shuffling her feet as she shifted infinitesimally closer to Clarke.

Truth be told, though, the drawings scared Clarke beyond her wildest imagination.

For some reason, they were so much more than just folklore to her - they were too realistic, too vivid, as she'd said before. Something was off about them, and the implications of what that might mean threatened to send Clarke spiraling in Lexa's grasp, knowing that they challenged everything she'd once believed to be true...
She couldn't think about that now, though. Now was about Lexa - about taking care of her, showing her how wonderful she was, how loved she was.

She could pay a visit to the archives any time she liked. Who knows when another opportunity to be alone with Lexa in an otherwise empty tower would come about?

*Live in the moment, Griffin,* she instructed herself, forcing any lingering unwanted thoughts from her mind.

For the second time that night, a colorful idea struck her - one that caused her cheeks to flush slightly as her heart fluttered in nervous anticipation of the mere *thought* of proposing such a thing...

Lexa, of course, noticed Clarke's change of expression almost instantly.

"Clarke?" she questioned, stroking the blonde's wrists where she still held them gently in her grasp. The concern was back in her gaze, though slightly more delicate now.

Clarke gulped harshly, pursing her lips as she attempted to figure out just how to frame what she wanted...

"Would you - do you want - ?" Clarke cut herself off with another harsh swallow, huffing a little as her heart began to pound unreasonably in her ears. Lexa gripped her wrists a little tighter, furrowing her brows a bit as she silently urged Clarke to continue.

Words were so inadequate sometimes...

Figuring she could better *show* Lexa what she wanted rather than tell her in this moment, Clarke stepped back, withdrawing her hands from a surprised - and thoroughly dismayed - Lexa, taking a couple of slow steps backwards before turning on her heels and heading around the bed.

With as much false confidence as she could muster, Clarke strode towards Lexa's bathroom, swinging her hips gratuitously knowing that she had her favorite pair of eyes helplessly glued to her the entire way.

She hesitated in her tracks for a moment at the sight of the immaculate white porcelain tub that sat atop a tiled step up in the center of the bathroom, a vanity on either side with a water closet tucked
away against the left wall. Much like in the Commander's main bedroom, what seemed like hundreds of candles decorated the room on every discernible surface - some even floating above the tub on a golden plate hanging by a chain from the ceiling.

The ambiance of the room was beyond romantic, and Clarke heated even more at the thought of what she was about to do.

Steeling herself against her unruly nerves, Clarke strode forward and kneeled on the step by the tub, turning the faucet and watching as warm water began to flow out.

She didn't have to turn around to know that Lexa was now watching her from the doorway where she was only moments before.

"Clarke?"

Her name was a hoarse whisper on the girl's lips, filled with a thick undercurrent of emotion that caused Clarke's heart to race impossibly faster in her chest.

Raw desire - that's what she'd heard in Lexa's almost inaudible whisper just now.

She couldn't turn around - not when her face would betray just what that desire was doing to her body at the moment...

"Clarke, what are you doing?" Lexa asked again, her voice slightly more steady this time - though that same undercurrent was still very obviously there.

Bracing herself against every unbidden emotion that might streak across her face, Clarke spun around finally, attempting to work her face into an expression somewhere between casual and sultry. Lexa's eyes were slightly widened, her lips parted as she took staggered breaths, her hands twitching restlessly by her sides.

Clarke took a deep breath, working her shoulders back as she prepared to speak.

"You spend everyday worrying about everyone but yourself - and I do mean literally everyone," Clarke began, keeping her voice as steady as her nerves would allow. "And you have no idea how much you do for them - how much you do for me... You saved me, Lexa. You took care of me, gave me a place to stay, and made sure that I healed in every possible way... Now I-I just..." Clarke trailed off, suddenly overwhelmed with the amount of emotions swirling inside of her as Lexa continued to
stare at her with passionate intensity.

"Let me do that for you now. Let me take care of you, Lex."

Lexa sucked in a sharp breath at that, struck momentarily speechless by the fervor in Clarke's words.

What the blonde was asking of her - to strip herself completely raw and vulnerable, to allow herself to be putty in the hands of the one person who had the ability to destroy her in one fell-swoop - was more than anyone probably ever had. This was beyond any battle Lexa had ever fought, beyond any obligation that would ever be required of her to fulfill...

After an eternity that seemed to have aged them both immeasurably, Lexa finally spoke, voice startlingly peaceful - as if no other idea had ever been so right:

"Only if you join me."

Clarke closed her eyes for a brief moment, overwhelmed by those five simple words that could potentially result in her undoing.

How easily she would allow herself to be brought to ruin...

Without another word, Clarke began to strip.

She bent to undo the straps of the gladiator sandals first, hands slightly trembling as she did so. Still bent at the waist, Clarke carefully removed the elaborate cuffs from her bicep and wrist, placing them delicately on the ground.

When she finally straightened back up, her heart practically beat out of her chest to find Lexa standing right in front of her, looking up into her eyes in the same way she had when she'd sworn fealty just hours beforehand - as if Clarke were the maker of her universe, and Lexa but a devoted disciple to her every word. Though neither girl spoke a single word, Clarke somehow knew exactly what to do next.

Hands still noticeably trembling, she reached out to unbuckled the pauldron strapped across Lexa's chest, removing the scarlet cape along with it. Emeralds danced across the surface of oceans as Clarke moved to undo the buttons on Lexa's jacket, working her way down the girl's torso with delicate care.

Lexa's hands had somehow made their way to rest on Clarke's hips, and she had to move her arms up slightly to allow her jacket to slip off of her shoulders and onto the floor once the blonde had
A current seemed to be flowing between them now - whether comprised of electricity or the tide of the greatest of oceans, one might never know. All either girl was cognizant of was the fact that both were on the verge of jumping from a precipice that could never be re-ascended, could never be re-conquered.

This was what the moment before a last breath must feel like...

Without even realizing that she'd done it, Clarke had lifted Lexa's long-sleeved shirt above her head and cast it aside, and the other girl now stood before her with nothing but the bindings on her torso.

Clarke could feel her jaw fall open as her eyes sought to memorize every plane and angle of the girl in front of her, lingering particularly greedily on the lines of the brunette's perfectly carved abdomen, the curve of her feminine hips into the skin-tight black pants she still wore.

A soft smile danced on Lexa's lips as she stepped closer to Clarke, gripping the blonde by the hips and squeezing a little as if asking for permission to return the favor. Clarke nodded her consent immediately, and Lexa kept her eyes glued to Clarke's as she bent to grasp onto the hem of the dress brushing the floor.

Slowly, and with the care of one attempting a sacred ritual, Lexa began to peel the fabric up Clarke's body, brushing her knuckles gently against the bare skin underneath and causing the blonde to shiver with the depth of her desire. The brunette lingered gratuitously at Clarke's hips, eyes still locked to blue as she began a slower ascent, drawing the dress up and over Clarke's head before haphazardly throwing the expensive fabric to the ground.

Feeling the need to complete the process as soon as possible - almost like the feeling right before ripping off a bandaid, strangely enough - Clarke made quick work of her bindings before moving to pull her underwear down over her legs and kicking them aside.

She was completely naked in front of Lexa now - in every possible way. Never in her life had she felt so exposed, and she could feel old anxieties threatening to rear their ugly heads as her insecurities prepared themselves to cycle through her mind...

Everything stopped abruptly at the first glimpse of the look on Lexa's face, though. Not even time could be moved now.

Clarke had never been one to love her body, to embrace the various imperfections that comprised her physical appearance and seemed to stick out more to her than to anyone else. She'd accepted a long time ago that she'd never be one of those people who felt completely comfortable in her own skin,
would never be one to dote on her own attractiveness. She'd always forced herself to believe that since beauty was said to be in the eye of the beholder, perhaps her eyes had simply adjusted to a different spectrum of beauty, altogether - one that didn't include her own self-perception.

But, now...

In this moment, she couldn't remember a time when she'd ever felt more beautiful - when she'd ever felt like perhaps she'd been seeing through the wrong pair of eyes the entire time...

In this moment, Lexa was looking at her like she was the most mesmerizing, captivating, and breathtaking part of an image carved from a divinity almost too pure, too exquisite for one to simply behold through vision, alone.

Never in her life would Clarke have believed that a single look could complete her in such a way, give her reason to reassess every self-loathing thought she'd ever had.

In this moment, Clarke read in Lexa's eyes what the girl before her seemed physically incapable of confessing - something far more powerful than any other sequence of words could ever hope to be:

*You are my everything.*

Eyes brimming with tears, lips slightly parted to take shaking breaths, Lexa stepped up to be beside Clarke, hands slightly extended before her as if she was caught between the intense desire to touch and the need to respect.

With a tender smile, Clarke took Lexa's left hand in one of her own as she stepped up and over the edge of the tub, moving to turn the faucet off with her free hand. Eyes locked on emeralds wide as saucers, Clarke slowly settled down into the tub, sighing in contentment as she rested back against the porcelain wall shrouded in perfectly-tempered water.

She kept her hold on Lexa's hand as she continued to stare at the girl who still stood above her, eyes now wildly roving over the blonde's body as she appeared suddenly desperate to be beside Clarke once more.

The blonde closed her eyes after a beat, sinking further into the bath in complete and utter bliss. What felt like mere seconds later, her eyes snapped open upon the feeling of Lexa squeezing her hand a little.

Clarke immediately locked onto Lexa's lithe figure, now completely devoid of clothing as she stood by the tub.
Clarke audibly gasped.

It was not everyday that one's definition of perfection re-aligned itself to sit alongside the image of a single person - but today was apparently one of those rare days.

Lexa's bare chest, though not as generous as Clarke's, was the most appealing and delicately feminine sight the blonde had ever had the privilege of memorizing, and her body responded in positively 
\textit{devastating} ways to every single inch of bare skin exposed. From the curve of her toned hourglass figure to the soft brunette curls at the apex of her thighs, Lexa was the most glorious image Clarke ever believed her existence could conjure up, and she vowed to spend every waking minute for the remainder of her life worshipping everything that ever was, is, and would be Lexa...

\textit{You are my everything.}

Eyes still locked on Clarke's, Lexa gracefully stepped into the tub, hesitating for a moment before the blonde mercifully created a space for her between her legs. Though her eyes widened a little bit at what this meant for the position their bodies would be in together, Lexa barely allowed another moment to pass before she succumbed to the need to be touching Clarke once more.

Lowering herself down slowly, Lexa allowed the water to embrace her as she made to lean back against Clarke's front, both girls inhaling sharply at the feel of Clarke's bare center pressing against the brunette's lower back. Feeling Lexa tense up slightly, Clarke slowly brought her hands around the other girl's body, moving to trace her fingertips along the girl's forearms as she drew her in closer.

"Let me take care of you," she whispered, repeating her earlier sentiment and feeling a tide of relief wash over her as Lexa seemed to relinquish her final reservations.

The other girl then leaned her head back to rest against Clarke's right shoulder, and the blonde pressed a chaste kiss to the side of her head while continuing her gentle movements on the girl's arms.

"I'm gonna undo your braids now, okay?"

Lexa nodded immediately, bending down to place a kiss to Clarke's right bicep where it reached around her. The simple action caused the blonde's heart to flutter hopelessly in her chest.

As Clarke's hands begin to work gently in Lexa's hair, the girl took a sponge from the side of the tub and began to remove her war paint, making quick work of the substance that easily ran off of her skin.

Remembering her own elaborate hairstyle, Clarke moved one hand back to remove the single rose
from her hair before quickly returning to the task at hand.

"When was the last time you took a day for yourself, Lex?" Clarke asked softly after a moment, hands still working in Lexa's hair as the brunette leaned against her with her eyes closed.

Lexa hummed for a moment, considering - the penultimate picture of peace.

"Days like that are a luxury I cannot afford, I'm afraid... One of the many aspects of the life I had to give up before I was even born, I suppose," she whispered back, sinking further into Clarke as she moved both hands to rest lightly on the blonde's thighs.

The way she spoke so casually of the sacrifices she'd made caused Clarke's heart to clench tightly in her chest, the need to hold and protect Lexa from every bad thing in the world unfurling in her chest with blistering intensity.

Clarke ran her fingers gently through Lexa's wavy locks, loosing the last of the braids as she pressed another kiss to the side of the girl's head. Lexa sighed happily at the touch, moving to bury her face in the crook of Clarke's neck as if by instinct.

"But, this... This moment, right now... This is worth all of it. You - " Lexa swallowed, moving so that she could lock eyes with Clarke, a look of pure adoration dancing through forests of green. "You've given me more in a matter of weeks than I could've ever asked for, and I've never - " She gulped again, clearly struggling to continue.

Clarke leaned forward to rest her forehead on Lexa's, silently encouraging the girl to continue. Lexa moved her right hand up to cup Clarke's cheek as she spoke again.

"I'm never going to let you go, Clarke... I can't."

With that, Lexa closed the distance between them and pressed their lips together, whimpering a little when Clarke ran her tongue along the girl's bottom lip.

Suddenly painstakingly aware of the fact that they were both, in fact, very naked and very much pressed against each other in every possible way, Clarke knew she only had so much more time before the dam broke and she succumbed to her body's pent-up desires.

It was only a matter of time now...
Breaking the kiss - much to Lexa's displeasure -, Clarke moved to get the shampoo from the side of the tub, pouring some into her hand before chuckling a little at Lexa's shameless attempts to re-connect their lips.

Before the brunette could sidetrack her further, though, Clarke began massaging the substance onto Lexa's scalp, and the unruly girl finally stilled with a sigh, accepting her fate and moving back into her original position.

As she worked, Clarke began to hum one of the lullabies her mother used to sing her before bed, a tune as eerily beautiful as it was tragic. Lexa, for her part, seemed enraptured in complete and utter bliss, more relaxed and undone than Clarke had ever seen her before. Clarke had never believed she could feel such things at the mere sight of a person...

After what felt like hours of gentle ministrations and silent basking in the warmth of the other's presence, Clarke slowly became aware of Lexa's hands coaxing up and down her thighs in a borderline-erotic manner - tracing her fingertips along the line of Clarke's inner thighs where they were pressed against her hips.

Having just washed the shampoo from Lexa's hair, Clarke used her newly-freed hands to trail down the outer side of the girl's arms and around to her torso, absentmindedly tracing little patterns into the girl's muscular abs. Lexa shivered beneath the touch, her movements on Clarke's thighs slightly faltering as she pressed impossibly closer to the blonde.

Feeling emboldened by Lexa's response to her, Clarke began to slowly trace her fingertips up, making sure that Lexa had plenty of time to refuse her given trajectory. Feeling nothing but the sharp intake of breath and the excited tensing of anticipation, Clarke moved her hands to her target, cupping Lexa's breasts at the exact moment she nipped at the exposed side of the girl's neck. Lexa legitimately gasped, hands gripping onto Clarke's thighs as the blonde kneaded into her breasts with care, pressing open-mouthed kisses to her neck as she went. Clarke was beyond pleased to note Lexa's physical response to her, moving to roll the girl's erect nipples between her fingertips as the brunette moaned in pure pleasure and began to move in a steady rhythm between Clarke's hips.

The slow grind did wondrous things to Clarke's body, and the blonde loosed a needy moan of her own as Lexa moved against her center.

Lexa's fingernails were practically digging into Clarke's thighs at this point, the blonde relentless in her sensual ministrations on the brunette's breasts.

"Tell me what you want, baby," Clarke husked in Lexa's ear after a moment, feeling a newfound bout of confidence coursing through her all of a sudden.

Lexa whimpered at the pet name, bucking back into Clarke slightly as the blonde continued to
massage her.

Then, Lexa whispered the last thing that Clarke expected to hear from her - the one sentence that threatened to send Clarke over the edge altogether in that moment:

"Make love to me, Clarke."

It was Clarke's turn to gasp, her hands immediately stilling on Lexa's breasts as the girl turned to meet her gaze with wide eyes. Clarke was wholly confident that she'd never seen Lexa appear so incredibly vulnerable with her before.

Clarke gaped at her for a moment, blue eyes probing Lexa's face as if searching for the hidden joke somewhere. She couldn't have heard her properly...

"You - I... You want to - ?" Clarke shook her head a little, absolutely stunned and nearly speechless for the first time in awhile.

Upon seeing Clarke's sudden distress, Lexa immediately turned around in the water, moving so that she was on her knees between Clarke's legs, grasping the girl's face in both of her hands as she looked down at her in what could only be described as the purest forms of love.

"I want you, Clarke - more than I think I've ever wanted anything in my life," Lexa told her softly, voice alight with a fierce sort of passion as she spoke. "I've been so concerned about losing you that I-I... I just can't imagine - " She cut herself off once more, closing her eyes against a sudden onslaught of emotions as Clarke gripped onto her hips, rubbing soothing circles into the soft skin there.

After a moment, Lexa opened her eyes now brimming with tears, allowing Clarke to see every unhidden fear and desire intermingling in the depths of a soul so exposed before her - opened up for the blonde to tarnish at her own discretion.

"I want it to be you, Clarke - I need it to be," Lexa continued, clearly struggling with the amount of emotions threatening to overtake her now. "If you'll have me, I... I want you to know me... Completely."

You are my everything.
Never having felt so sure of anything in her life - and feeling the need to move beyond words now -, Clarke surged forwards, crashing her lips to Lexa's as the brunette moaned a sound between unbelievable relief and impossible lust.

Suddenly feeling everything they'd ever restrained since the moment they'd lain eyes on each other, the two girls became legitimately desperate in the other's arms.

Without even realizing how she'd gotten there, Clarke was somehow lifted into Lexa's arms, her legs securely locked around the girl's waist as the brunette skillfully stepped up and out of the tub and carried them hastily from her bathroom.

Neither even sparing a thought about the fact that they were still dripping wet, they crashed onto Lexa's bed furs, the movement causing the brunette to slide deliciously against the place Clarke needed her most. Seemingly unsatisfied by their position, Lexa moved them so that Clarke's head was resting comfortably on her pillows as she propped herself on her arms on either side of the blonde's head, her hips beginning a sensual grind between Clarke's.

Feeling the overwhelming need to show Lexa just what taking care of her actually meant, Clarke suddenly flipped them over, switching their positions surprisingly gracefully as Lexa yelped a little in something that sounded strangely like aroused surprise.

With their lips detached as they both heaved labored breaths, Clarke smirked down at the flustered brunette with as much smugness as she could muster in her current state.

"I'm supposed to be taking care of you, remember?" Clarke whispered huskily, moving to begin trailing featherlight kisses down Lexa's neck, chest, and onto her breasts, pausing for a moment to look up to meet her love's gaze in question.

L Lexa nodded a little too eagerly, and Clarke almost chuckled a little as she brought her lips down to latch onto the girl's taught nipple, sucking the small bud into her mouth and rolling her tongue over it with torturous slowness. Lexa gasped, canting her hips up as her nails raked to midway down Clarke's back, causing the blonde to shiver a little while she continued to lick and nip at Lexa...

As soon as Clarke looked up to meet Lexa's desperate gaze through half-lidded eyes and a thick haze of desire, it was as if time stopped.

This was the moment; that elusive instant in a person's life when everything changes in a nanosecond, when an entire reality gets flipped on its head and rearranged to tether itself to something new - in this case, someone new.

This was lightyears beyond any experimental encounter with some random boy on the Ark - this was
what it was supposed to be. This was going to be Clarke's first time making love, and the second that her eyes met Lexa's, both girls knew that this would be irreversible - something that neither one of them could hope to come back from...

This was what permanence would feel like.

With that knowledge now setting both of their hearts alight with a fire brighter than anything either girl had ever known, the air suddenly shifted around them, turning reckless wanton need into a much more powerful wave of unconditional and fully-altering love.

Tears welling in both girls' eyes now, Clarke moved up to press a searing kiss to Lexa's lips, moaning deep within her throat when the brunette tangled her fingers in blonde locks to draw her impossibly closer.

It was a heavy game of push-and-pull, all tongues and teeth and unadulterated passion, and it was almost too much for their bodies to bear.

Breaking the kiss as a single tear made its way down her cheek, Clarke looked to Lexa one final time - the other girl allowing a few tears of her own to slide down her cheeks, as well - before she began a slow descent with her right hand, sliding her fingers over the soft skin of Lexa's breasts, abdomen, hips, and inner thigh before stopping just inches from where she was so desperately needed.

Eyes wide with a mixture of raw vulnerability, anticipation, and more love than Clarke had ever believed possible, Lexa nodded her consent one last time before Clarke slowly slipped her fingers down to trace through slick heat, causing both girls to suck in sharp breaths. To Clarke's immense wonder, Lexa was beyond ready for her, and she only made to tease the girl for another lingering moment, circling her entrance at a tantalizing pace, before finally slipping inside with one finger, waiting for the girl to adjust before adding another.

Lexa was positively quaking beneath her now, gripping onto Clarke's shoulders like a vice as the blonde rested their foreheads together, lips ghosting against each other as their breaths came out in harsh pants. Comfortably certain that Lexa had fully adjusted to her, Clarke began to move, pumping in and out at a sensuous pace that had Lexa's hips bucking up to meet each downward thrust out of sheer need for more.

As Clarke moved her lips to lace languid kisses to the exposed side of the girl's neck, still maintaining her torturous pace within Lexa to the point where she could feel the beginnings of her approaching peak, the blonde knew exactly the way to give her love what she desired...

Without warning, Clarke began to slide down Lexa's body, trailing hot kisses everywhere she went while using the lingering dampness of their bodies as leverage to move her - all the while maintaining her steady work at Lexa's center. Using her free hand to inch the girl's thighs apart, Clarke moved so that Lexa's legs were settled comfortably over her shoulders, placing kisses up the inside of her right
thigh as she made her intentions blatantly clear.

Without preamble, Clarke ducked her head to drag her tongue up slowly through Lexa's dripping folds, causing the girl to cant her hips up further into the blonde's mouth as she loosed a strangled cry.

"Clarke... Oh my god."

Hearing those words from Lexa's mouth - the way the girl worshipped around her name in such a way - was nearly enough to send Clarke over the edge, herself, but she managed to hold it together out of sheer willpower alone.

Continuing to pump in and out of Lexa with abandon, Clarke began to lick teasingly at the girl's now highly-sensitive bundle of nerves, guided by some instinctual part of her that demanded that she take care and protect.

Time was doing funny things around them now, weaving fluidly between stuttering at certain moments, nearly in-time with the movements of the two girls now so completely enraptured in one another. Unbeknownst to either one, it was simply accommodating the shift; the instance in which two souls had severed their individual ties to merge into one unbreakable, inalterable bond - one that was the personification of permanence, something that soared far beyond the confines of labels and the inadequacy of such words...

As Clarke began to feel the telltale signs of Lexa's fast-approaching climax, she re-doubled her efforts to pour as much of her raw emotion into every stroke, every lick, determined to take care, protect, please. Never in her life would she have believed that a single person could've given her such divine purpose, but here she was, having been proved wrong more times than she could count.

Who would've guessed that the Commander of 12 Clans would become a mess of low moans, soft cries, and shed tears as a result of the tender ministrations of the one she loved so irrevocably, so purely?

As Clarke sucked the bundle of nerves between her soft lips, the tether finally snapped.

"Klark!!" Lexa cried out, knotting her fingers in blonde locks, back arching off the bed with her head thrown back and eyes shut as she succumbed to waves of clenching, shuddering, and all-around worshipful keening at Clarke's magnificent handiwork.

Clarke, for her part, was more than content to coax the girl through her climax, all gentle licks and easy thrusts as Lexa was lost in a sea of soft moans and cries, body still coursing through the aftershocks of perhaps the most powerful orgasm of her life.

After what felt like eternity in a matter of seconds, Clarke felt a gentle tug at the back of her head,
urging her to come up from her happy place of peppering feathery kisses across Lexa's hipbone as she waited patiently for the girl to come back to her...

Abruptly pulling her out of her bliss, the amount of tears streaming down Lexa's cheeks now was enough to send instant worry coursing through Clarke's chest, and she immediately moved to hover over the girl protectively, both hands cupping Lexa's face as her brows furrowed with the depth of her concern.

"What is it, Lexa? What's wrong?" Clarke whispered urgently, fighting through the haze of bliss in her brain to get to a place where she could more adequately focus on the distressed girl in her arms.

"Her heart.

Once again, Lexa took Clarke by surprise, a wet smile stretching across her gorgeous features - though tinged in ancient sadness as it was.

She moved her hands to stroke up Clarke's sides, causing the blonde to shiver with longing, now painfully aware of the unresolved ache between her legs despite herself.

"It's the furthest thing from wrong, Clarke," Lexa spoke finally, voice cracking with the amount of raw emotions she fought to contain. Her emerald eyes swam where they locked onto sapphire now. "I just... What I feel for you, it... It scares me, hodnes, I - "

She choked on the lump in her throat, clearly struggling to force words out now.

"I can't lose you... Not now, not... Not ever."

The amount of uninhibited fear in Lexa's voice was enough to make Clarke's heart clench rather painfully in her chest, but she forced past the ache to run her thumb tenderly across Lexa's bottom lip - a gesture of comfort.

The girl was clearly on the precipice of a dangerous spiral...

"Look at me, Lexa. Please," Clarke begged, doing her best to lock onto green eyes now flitting wildly about her face - as if attempting to chase away old demons beginning to cast their shadows there.

"I'm right here, Lex, and I'm not going anywhere, okay? I've got you, and you've got me, and
Clarke had re-positioned herself to cradle a now sobbing Lexa in her arms, utterly thrown and completely heartbroken as the girl clawed at her helplessly, succumbing to something that had probably been building since the moment she'd realized her feelings for Clarke were so much deeper than anything she could've imagined.

Clarke felt her own tears bubbling over as she thought of just how terrifying this must be for Lexa - to realize that she'd given every piece of herself to the one person capable of destroying her entire existence, to have completely relinquished her power. How hard she must've fought to maintain that facade of stoic barriers in the interest of self-preservation, only to have every wall broken down by a single meeting of green and blue...

All Clarke could do was hold her now, wait until the shock of that realization wore off, and it was legitimately ripping her to shreds...

But, then:

"Ai hod yu in."

 Barely a whisper, encompassed by whimpers and staggered breaths, but it was there - thrown into the permanent and unchangeable abyss to synchronize itself with the sacred rhythm of their heartbeats.

It was there, and it was everything.

You are my everything.

Without even a breath of hesitation, Clarke responded with what she knew to be the only remaining absolute truth in her life.

"I love you, too... More than anything."

Another strangled sob tore from Lexa's throat at that, her entire body seeming to awaken to a visceral vitality that shook every ounce of grief, fear, and apprehension from her system.
She was loved - so truly, deeply, and irreversibly loved -, and everything was going to be okay.

It would have to be...

Moving from her place tucked into the crook of Clarke's neck, arms wrapped around the blonde's waist in a desperately possessive hold, Lexa surged up to crash their lips together once more, effectively forcing any gnawing worries from either girl's mind.

Those things could wait for now - until morning, perhaps -, and they would have to, if either girl had anything to say about it...

For now, they simply needed to be lost in one another again, in the triumph of having conquered one of life's most daunting hurdles - finding the long-lost halves of their previously broken souls.

Clarke had known the experience of re-connecting with her wandering heart would be somewhat of a shock to her system. All she could do now, though, was hope that this experience wouldn't render her completely vulnerable for the rest of her days, open to anyone who might seek to harm the pieces of herself she was forced to let roam the earth without her constant protection - a fate as cruel as it was blissful...

For now, she'd simply have to be content to bask in the indelible truths that had redefined what purpose meant to her - what life, itself, meant to her:

You are my everything.

I love you.
Chapter End Notes

Really curious for your thoughts on this one...
To Live in the Moment

Chapter Notes

Supriiiiise update folks!! I had this one pretty much written before I published the last one, and I was able to get some free time to finish it up yesterday, so here it is!! It's shorter than the last one for sure, but that one was also a novel sooo lolol I cannot BELIEVE we're already on Chapter 20 oh my lord... That being said, thanks for sticking with it this long (if you have lol)!! Your lovely comments/feedback seriously brighten my days cuz you guys are the BEST <3

Enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Soft kisses, peppered across every exposed inch of her face, neck, collarbones, and shoulders - that's the first thing Clarke became aware of as her mind attempted to clear away the groggy haze still lingering. The feel of arms wrapped around her midsection, slender fingers brushing stray strands of hair away from her eyes, feathery kisses to each eyelid.

If this was the kind of treatment Clarke would receive every morning she awakened in the arms of the Commander, she might consider placing an official request for a change of rooms...

Clarke suddenly became aware of the whispered cooing of Trigedasleng against her ear, and the hot breath tickling the soft skin there was enough to bring childish giggles from her throat. At the sweet sound, Lexa immediately increased the persistency of her ministrations, moving to position herself on top of Clarke as she began a loving assault down the blonde's jawline and neck.

The vibrations of Clarke's soft laughter did funny things to the way their bodies were still connected, legs tangled together beneath soft sheets, and blue eyes immediately snapped open to meet devastatingly famished green, their lips swiftly crashing together to a chorus of raspy moans and delicious whimpers.
Once again, Clarke was struck by the wave of pure elation that caught her in its tide as she and Lexa resumed their careful mapping of each other's bodies, memorizing the lines and curves of every inch they were lucky enough to discover...

Clarke was sprawled on her back, hands splayed beside her as she attempted to breath through the aftershocks of a life-affirming release, Lexa equally as spent beside her.

She turned her head to look over at the girl, unsurprised to find emerald eyes already memorizing every line of her profile.

With a mischievous smirk, Clarke sat up in the bed, making to get up and smiling even more smugly to herself when Lexa loosed a dramatic whine of protest, hands grappling at the blonde's back to pull the girl back to her. Seemingly realizing that she was being challenged at such an early hour of the morning - sunlight streaming through the wall piece in gorgeous beams -, Lexa immediately bolted upwards, wrapping her arms securely around Clarke's waist and pulling her back down to the mattress, moving to straddle the blonde the second she had her flat on her back once more. With the grace of one well-versed in the skills of a seasoned-warrior - and one just generally good with their hands, really -, Lexa easily tangled her fingers with Clarke's and pinned their entwined hands above the blonde's head, causing an appreciative gasp to slip from Clarke's lips.

Lexa fixed her with a lazy grin, eyes dancing with a mixture of youthful playfulness and undeniable devotion.

"Where do you think you're going, hodnes?" Lexa inquired sultrily, voice rasping through a throat worn raw with hours of delicious moans as she bent down to press languid kisses to the exposed column of Clarke's neck.

The blonde had to bite back a desperate moan of her own.

"There's this thing we space-dwellers believe in," Clarke responded breathlessly, fighting against the increasing desire to let Lexa hold her down for as long as she pleased, "called responsibility - you know, a duty to the outside world, usually along the lines of a job of some sort... I don't know if you've ever heard of it before."

Lexa chuckled merrily against the base of Clarke's throat, sounding just about as carefree as the blonde had ever heard her, still continuing her sensuous assault on overly-sensitive skin.
"I do not believe I'm familiar with the concept, no," Lexa responded, sucking the skin above Clarke's pulse point in a way that was certain to leave a possessive mark behind for all to see.

Though Clarke normally wasn't one to indulge in such behavior, the prospect of bearing a mark from Lexa left heat pooling deep within the depths of her stomach, threatening to deter her once again.

Determined to recover some of her long-lost power, Clarke used Lexa's current distraction at the base of her throat to her advantage as she leveraged her body weight to flip their positions, pinning an audibly-surprised Lexa to the bed with a grunt of satisfaction.

Overcome with that same wave of tenderness towards the girl who was now looking up at her as if she was the most captivating conjuring of divinity, Clarke disentangled her left hand from Lexa's just long enough to tuck a wild strand of hair behind the girl's ear before she collapsed unceremoniously atop her love.

Chuckling quietly at Clarke's antics, Lexa placed a gentle kiss to the top of the blonde's head where it was now tucked into her neck, wrapping both arms around the girl's waist to pull her as close as humanly possible. Clarke sighed contentedly as she moved her right hand to trace absently at the hollow of the brunette's throat, effectively sending chills down Lexa's spine.

"I was serious about wanting to sketch your tattoo, you know," Clarke spoke softly after awhile, voice slightly dreamy as she was suddenly taken back hours into the night - to the moment she'd first noticed the elaborate design down the length of Lexa's back as the girl sprawled on her stomach in between bouts of passionate love-making.

Clarke had vowed to her then that she'd capture the gorgeous design on paper for her own personal records sometime in the near future, and Lexa had merely hummed a sound of contentment in the back of her throat before pulling the blonde back to her lips once more.

"You can do whatever you like, hodnes - as long as you promise to stay with me," Lexa whispered reverently, tracing soothing patterns along the skin of Clarke's lower back as she did so.

The giddy response Lexa's words loosed in her body was downright embarrassing in its intensity, and Clarke pressed herself further into the brunette in the attempts to hide her obvious blush from the other girl.

How could one person fill her with so much ecstasy, so much all-encompassing peace? It seemed almost unfair to the rest of the human race who Clarke knew to be significantly less lucky in comparison...

"Hmm, and how long would I be expected to extend this so-called 'stay?'" Clarke asked, pulling back to meet Lexa's gaze with an exaggeratedly haughty expression on her face. "Are we talking days? Weeks? Months? No, that can't possibly work... I can't possibly - "
Her smug teasing was cut short by the hot press of lips against her own, by hands tangling in her tousled hair as she moaned happily into Lexa's mouth.

The other girl pulled the blonde's pliant body on top of her own, relishing in the skin-to-skin contact that had become their sacred reality for what felt like eternity in one night. Clarke nipped at Lexa's bottom lip, causing the girl below her to whimper slightly as her hands slid down to grip onto the blonde's backside with expert prowess.

Right before they were about to pick up on the last rapturous place they left off, a loud knock at Lexa's bedroom door had both girls freezing instantly in panic.

Without even realizing what was happening, Clarke somehow ended up flat on the bed once more, Lexa sitting up beside her to angle her body protectively in front of the blonde's stunned figure.

Just as Lexa managed to pull the sheets around the two of them in a way that concealed as much bare skin as conceivably possible in such short notice, Anya burst through the doors, utterly oblivious to the scene she was walking in on as she began to speak.

"It seems we've managed to misplace the skai prisa, Leksa - " Her words abruptly died in her throat the moment her eyes locked onto the sight of a fuming Lexa glaring murderously at her from where she did her best to block Clarke from sight on the bed.

Anya's jaw nearly unhinged as it fell to the floor, eyes going comically wide as she stumbled back a step in her bewilderment. Ever the sharp mind, though, the warrior recovered almost immediately, expression quickly turning from one of dumbfounded disbelief to knowing amusement in the span of seconds.

Clarke watched from around the side of Lexa's arm positioned over her torso as Anya unsuccessfully attempted to staunch the ridiculous grin from her face now.

"On second thought, I do believe you've found her..."

"GET. OUT. ONYA!!" Lexa roared, angrily punctuating each word and sounding every bit the battle-hardened Commander in that moment.

Had it not been for the fact that they'd spent the entirety of the night before making sweet and tender love to one another, Clarke legitimately believed she would've been inclined to run and hide at the blazon fury evident in Lexa's voice. As it were, though, she simply allowed her eyes to widen a bit as she watched Anya take a fearful step back, all amusement immediately squelched from her expression.
"O-of course, Heda," the warrior stammered, backtracking hastily, hands going up in front of her in a placating gesture. "My sincerest apologies. I will...return at a later time..."

With that, Anya turned on her heels and all-but-sprinted from the room as she slammed the doors shut behind her.

Silence fell over them for a moment as Lexa took noticeably-labored breaths, whipping around to scan Clarke's face with flashes of pure horror, apprehension, and worry for the girl below her flashing through her eyes, all traces of the Commander gone now.

Taking both of them by surprise, Clarke was the first to break the silence by succumbing to raucous fits of laughter, closing her eyes and throwing her head back against the pillows as her entire body shook with hysterics.

*Of all the people to walk in...*

Though her eyes were still closed, Clarke could feel more than see the sigh of relief Lexa breathed at the blonde's joyous reaction, leaning forward to rest her forehead on Clarke's chest as she fell into her own soft chorus of laughter.

Both girls shook with mirth, still very much wrapped in each other as they enjoyed the aftermath of such a startingly normal moment - one that contrasted so sharply to the dire situations they often found themselves in, as youthful as it was.

If happiness was truly captured in the in-betweens - a moment-to-moment type of deal, as they say -, this one instance would be enough to sate them for many years to come, it would seem.

As Clarke continued to laugh to herself - though much quieter than moments before -, she opened her eyes to see a glowing Lexa hovering over her, looking down at her with something akin to pure awe and complete adoration. Her eyes swam with jovial tears as she looked down at the one person who'd come to equate to the very definition of euphoria in the center of her universe.

The look was enough to silence Clarke completely, the laughter dying in her throat as she reached up to cup Lexa's cheeks in her own daze of reverent awe.

Once again, the soul immersed in oceans leagues deep brought itself to high tide to intertwine with the one dancing through hidden emerald forests, reveling in the comforting embrace of its precious mate.
"Let me do that for you," Clarke implored softly, replacing Lexa's hands with both of her own as she moved to buckle the pauldron strap across the girl's chest.

Lexa fixed her with the sweetest of smiles in an expression wholly overtaken by pure and unadulterated love, moving to place a gentle kiss on the tip of Clarke's nose before sliding her hands down the expanse of the blonde's back.

Clarke blushed a little under the doting attention, stepping forward to tuck herself into Lexa's waiting arms.

The two girls stood together in their tiny universe for immeasurable moments, neither desiring to move a single inch from the other but knowing that the outside world would never stop demanding that very thing from them.

"Are you sure you're healed enough to begin your training today? I can always postpone the activities -"

"I'm fine, Lexa. Really," Clarke told her firmly, interrupting the girl's worried line of thinking for what felt like the hundredth time in the span of an hour.

Shortly after they'd lost themselves in one another in the wake of their unexpected moment of levity, Lexa had told her that she'd instructed Anya to begin the process of fight training for Clarke - hence, the reason she'd burst into the Commander's quarters unannounced, a habit that normally wouldn't have elicited such a hostile response from the brunette under different circumstances...

Clarke, though initially surprised beyond belief, immediately delighted in the idea, throwing her arms around her love and peppering her face with grateful kisses in response.

Feeling the heavy weight of obligation to return to the world of those living a significantly less visceral existence, Lexa had summoned her handmaidens to bring a new outfit for the skai prisa - one that would be much more well-equipped for the physical endeavors ahead of her. The two women had complied immediately, of course, neither questioning why they were to bring the clothes to their Commander's room or the fact that the blonde had barely managed to hasten behind the partition to the bathroom before they'd walked in.

Though it had taken Clarke considerably longer to get dressed than usual - as Lexa had insisted on deterring her in every conceivable way for as long as possible -, the blonde was pleasantly surprised
by the amount of movement her new outfit allowed, the tight black pants and dark long-sleeved shirt equipped with a generous amount of breathing room beneath the specially-tailored fabric, simple black combat boots adorning her feet. Leather guards were laced into the stitching of the fabric over her knees and elbows, and Lexa had carefully weaved two braids around the crown of Clarke's head to meet at the back.

(The hickey on her neck was in plain view, unfortunately - though Clarke highly doubted anyone would bother her about it much.)

Clarke had never felt - nor looked - more like a Grounder in her entire life, and her appearance had her heart soaring happily in her chest.

She leaned back in Lexa's arms to meet the girl's gaze, eyes half-lidded and the picture of contentment as the brunette began to speak.

"I'm starting to rethink my decision to let you out of my sight...," Lexa trailed off, clearly teasing - though an undercurrent of worry was obviously present.

Clarke smiled gently at her, knowing full-well that the girl's anxieties were beginning to peek through once more - and were probably always swimming just below the surface of her careful facade where Clarke was concerned.

"I'll tell you what," Clarke began softly, moving to trace the girl's jawline with her thumb as Lexa leaned into the contact, closing her eyes. "You go off and keep society from imploding, and I'll let Anya beat me with a stick for a few hours. Then, we'll meet back here and compare battle scars, yeah?"

Lexa chuckled softly, shaking her head a little as she pulled Clarke close to press a chaste kiss to her forehead.

"If Anya displaces a single hair on your head, she'll have me to answer to," Lexa promised, tone somehow unyielding though obviously teasing.

It was Clarke's turn to laugh at that, pressing her forehead against Lexa's for a moment before pulling back again, taking a step backwards and tugging the brunette along with her by both hands.

"You're so cute when you're threatening people's lives on my behalf," Clarke responded, quirking her eyebrows playfully and watching as Lexa's mouth fell open, her tongue running slowly across a full bottom lip.
Without warning, Lexa suddenly yanked the blonde back to her and tangled her fingers in the girl's hair as she pressed a searing kiss to lips parted in surprise. Clarke moaned into the girl's open mouth, crashing their tongues together in an erotic dance, their usual game of push-and-pull - the very game threatening to effectively ruin both of their public reputations.

Far too soon, the girls were forced apart by the trivial need to breathe, and they leaned their foreheads together as they worked through their bodies' heated response to each other.

"Keryon help me...you're going to be the death of me, ai niron - that much I'm sure of," Lexa panted, shaking her head a little in breathless disbelief - though her expression spoke of one fully-willing to accept such a doomed fate, if only to prolong such a fleeting existence...

Clarke pressed their lips together once more, cupping Lexa's face in her palms as the girl brushed their noses together tenderly.

"I love you, Clarke... So much more than I - " Lexa gulped, clearly struggling to put labels on the depths of her emotions now.

But Clarke knew, could read every poignant yet fleeting emotion as it crossed the expanse of forests to spread through the depths of her heart...

You are my everything.

"Ai hod yu in, Leksa. Otaim," Clarke whispered back, wishing more than anything that they could simply get back in bed and hide from the rest of the world and its daunting demands...

With a regretful sigh, Clarke untangled herself from Lexa - still glowing from the blonde's affirming reassurances -, taking the last couple of steps towards the door as her heart watched from a short distance away.

"I will see you tonight, hodnes," Lexa promised, slowly slipping into the mask of the Commander before Clarke's knowing eyes.

"Until then, Lex."
"I swear to god, Clarke - she's dragging us out into the middle of nowhere to kill us. I just know it," Raven whispered a little too loudly, brushing against Clarke's shoulder as they continued their trek into the woods.

Anya led the way a few yards in front of them, Bellamy not far behind her with Clarke and Raven bringing up the rear.

The four of them - all dressed in similar-looking training gear, the golden cuffs secured around their wrists - were headed to some undisclosed location what felt like many miles outside of the city walls. Though Ryder had initially been assigned to accompany them as a guard, the man had been pulled away last-minute by Gustus to discuss upcoming actions against Azgeda with the Commander - whose reaction to this change was wholly unknown to the foursome. Wells was still too weak to train, and Octavia had taken to following Indra around Polis like a lost puppy as of late - Lincoln behaving quite similarly around the Sky Girl -, insisting that she assist the warrior in any area she could possibly be of service before she returned to TonDC, much to the older woman's obvious dismay.

As it were, Anya asserted that she was more than capable of "babysitting" the three members of Skaikru, and she'd stormed out of the main gate of the city without so much as a glance over her shoulder to see if Clarke and her friends were keeping up.

It felt like they'd been walking for hours now - which, if Clarke had gauged the position of the sun peeking through the canopy correctly, they actually had been -, and the hike had effectively exhausted them before their training even began. Whether or not that was Anya's intended purpose from the start, Clarke had no idea; all she knew was that her feet were positively aching from the amount of rocks and branches she'd had to step over.

"If I was planning on killing you, you'd have been dead the moment we left the city - be sure of that," Anya informed them from the front of the group, not bothering to turn around as she spoke.

Clarke and Raven shared a disbelieving sideways glance, mouths agape as they marveled over the warrior's impeccable hearing.
"Although, I probably wouldn't have made it far before the Commander cut me down herself," Anya continued, tone taking on a slight undercurrent now. "She seems to have taken a great liking to some of you as of late..."

Clarke nearly face-planted onto the forest floor.

Although she knew Anya would never broadcast the nature of her and Lexa's relationship in any way, shape, or form - both out of respect for her Heda and the desire to protect her former second -, the thought of enduring hours of underhanded jabs about her sex life left Clarke practically blanching.

*Today's gonna be a fun one*, she thought to herself, praying that her embarrassment wasn't too terribly evident on her face.

"Well I, for one, am enjoying the walk, and I'd like to personally thank Anya here for showing us the way," Bellamy spoke up for the first time, uncharacteristically polite in his address to the warrior.

Raven snorted.

"Kissing her ass isn't gonna get her into your bed, Blake," Raven told him, rolling her eyes as she narrowly avoided tripping over a tree root. "Probably won't keep her from kicking your stupid ass either."

Bellamy whipped around to throw a glare over his shoulder, pursing his lips and shaking his head a little to emphasize his annoyance.

Meanwhile, Anya simply walked a little faster...

Suddenly, a realization hit Clarke so hard she nearly stumbled in her tracks.

*She'd forgotten to tell Lexa.*

In the pure bliss of their own little world they'd created that morning, it'd completely slipped Clarke's mind to mention her run-in with Roan. How could she have been so short-sighted?

Squaring her shoulders back at the curious look Raven was giving her now, Clarke resolved herself to tell the Commander of the conversation as soon as she saw the girl that evening, knowing full-well that worrying about it now would do her no good...
"We are here," Anya told them, pulling the blonde out of her thoughts as they stepped into a wide meadow encompassed by tall trees on every side.

The four of them walked through the tree line into the open space, and Clarke couldn't help but wonder exactly how far out from Polis they'd gone, the landscape wholly unfamiliar to her now.

"Well, this has been so much fun - truly, madly, deeply -, but I think I'm just gonna head on back now...," Raven turned on her heels, hurrying a couple of steps before Clarke caught her by the collar, fixing the mechanic with a stern, almost-motherly expression. Bellamy noticeably rolled his eyes in Clarke's periphery.

Anya had turned to face them and stood with her hands on her hips, expression stoic yet still somehow obviously annoyed as she watched them. Her warrior garb managed to stay pristine throughout their entire trek, and Clarke envied the woman's ability to seemingly glide over every type of terrain - very unlike the careless way she threw herself about.

"From here on out, you will not talk, laugh, or even breath without my permission," Anya began, voice exceptionally bored while still managing to sound frighteningly authoritative. "You will only ask questions over matters of life or death, and you may only stop if you happen to lose a limb somehow. You will not receive any kind of special treatment under my watch, regardless of how special you might think you are. Am I understood?"

She just had to say something else, didn't she?

Clarke, Bellamy, and Raven gawked at the warrior with identical expressions of disbelief and terror intermingling.

Raven, of course, was the first one to raise a finger to argue.

"Exactly how flexible is that lil' set of rules - ?"

"Am I understood?!"

"Yes, your majesty," Raven replied immediately, comically snapping to attention with an old-fashioned military-style salute.

Clarke had to fight the intense urge to face-palm as she and Bellamy nodded their compliance much more willingly.
Anya simply narrowed her eyes, scanning over the faces of the three novice Skaikru with unconcealed disdain.

"Very well," she muttered, moving to clasp her hands behind her back, stance casual. An eerily joyful smile worked its way across her features then, chilling Clarke to the bone.

"We shall begin."

Sweat poured down Clarke's forehead at an incessant rate, running into the open cut above her left eyebrow and causing a sharp sting to spread throughout her skin. Hissing a little, she moved her hand up to swipe at it - much to no avail, as another bead immediately replaced the one she'd wiped away -, before hunching back into her previous position, both hands resting on her knees.

She tried her best to steady her erratic breathing pattern, but her efforts proved ultimately futile as her chest continued to heave up and down.

"You know," Raven huffed breathlessly from where she sprawled five-star in the center of the meadow a couple of feet from Clarke. "Gauging my eyes out with a spoon probably would've brought me more enjoyment than this special type of hell."

The mechanic kicked her legs pointlessly into the air as if to emphasize just how much she despised her current predicament.

"You think we could just crawl back to Polis without her noticing?" Bellamy asked desperately as he sat panting with his knees pulled up to his chest not too far from Raven. "We might need some sort of distraction to pull it off, though... A sacrifice, maybe?"

"I volunteer," Raven spoke up immediately, raising her hand into the air for a moment before flopping it back down onto the ground behind her. "Just do me a favor and hit me over the head first, alright?"
Before any sort of agreement could be reached, Anya re-emerged from the forest where she’d retreated to only moments before to "get some fresh air" - which seemed exceptionally redundant considering they were already outdoors, but who was Clarke to question it?

As she made her way back to the three miserable figures in the center of the meadow, an insultingly nonchalant expression on her face, Raven loosed a loud groan of protest - one that echoed throughout the entire clearing - as she started in on a predictably mellow-dramatic rant.

"Please, god...no... Which almighty being did I piss off badly enough to deserve this?! I only stole that old lady's rations one time, and she probably died before she even knew they were missing anyways - "

"Shof op, Sky Girl - or I will have you sprint the length of this meadow again and again until you wear holes in the bottoms of your shoes," Anya commanded, clearly unamused by Raven's ridiculousness.

The mechanic paled immediately, shutting her mouth with an almost-audible snap.

Clarke simply shook her head, letting it hang down below her shoulders as her exhaustion made itself more readily known in her limbs.

Anya had managed to trick them at first, giving them simple stretches to warm up with that provided them a false sense of security for several precious minutes. Then, snapping them into the reality of their extensive training process like a whip across their backs, the warrior had made them sprint the length of the meadow back-and-forth until Clarke had actually felt tears welling in her eyes - her body's last resort against apparent physical torture, it seemed.

After they were nice and dead on their feet from their "endurance-building activities," the warrior had then lined them up two-by-two - Raven against Bellamy and Clarke with Anya - to begin practicing basic sparring drills, in between which they would run to the furthest tree line and back. Unfortunately for Clarke, the warrior had taken to demonstrating each technique on her soft body, and the blonde could only pray that the bruises decorating her torso wouldn't be permanent.

She also silently hoped that Anya would get her little dose of karma in the form of an infuriated Lexa determined to deliver matching blows to the warrior on her love's behalf...

The fact that Clarke's muscles were still unreasonably sore from her...nighttime activities with the Commander the night before didn't make the process any easier, and Anya seemed to discern the cause of her increased slowness almost immediately, taking every possible chance to make that knowledge known. Clarke couldn't count the number of shameless sexual innuendos she'd had to endure at this point, and she almost would've preferred the warrior simply beat the shit out of her had it not been for the fact that the woman hit so hard. Despite this, though, Clarke was still mildly pleased with the fact that neither her right leg nor her arm seemed to be giving her any more trouble from her initial injuries during the pod crash - a welcome sign of progress.
The three of them had only managed to get away with their little impromptu "break" due to the fact that Raven had legitimately thrown herself onto the ground in protest, unwilling to stand back up despite Anya's relentless demands. Ever the opportunists, Clarke and Bellamy were simply taking advantage of Raven's affinity for defying authority figures...

"You will never learn to fight if you cannot move past the menial limitations of your weakened bodies," Anya informed them, voice devoid of any emotion as she looked them over with that same level of disdain, a single eyebrow raised in her otherwise passive expression. Her arms were crossed in front of her, and Clarke could almost see the woman physically resisting the urge to tap her foot - the only indicator of the extent of her impatience

"What is that even supposed to mean?!" Raven spoke up, always the first to call the warrior out for some strange reason.

Anya seemed to have noticed this, as well, as she usually had to fight against some sort of outwardly emotional reaction whenever the mechanic would snap at her. Normally, Clarke believed the warrior would've lashed out at someone so blatantly insolent to her authority by now, but, where Raven was concerned, apparently, she always seemed to bite her tongue.

*How odd...*

Without warning, a gunshot suddenly cracked through the clearing, brutally ripping Clarke out of her revery.

She straightened up like a shot, whipping around towards the source of the sound as adrenaline began to pound through her veins almost instantaneously.

Bellamy and Raven had immediately jumped to their feet, as well, stances at the ready as they, too, scanned their surroundings, exhaustion long-forgotten.

*Grounders don't use guns...*

The moment Clarke turned around to gauge Anya's reaction, her blood ran cold to see the warrior wide-eyed, clutching her left bicep as blood seeped through her fingers to run down her arm.

"*Anya!*" Clarke yelled, running to grasp the stunned warrior around the shoulders to support her.

Raven and Bellamy were at her side in an instant, still actively looking every which way - though the mechanic's expression was now alight with an uncharacteristic level of concern as she eyed Anya in her periphery.
Moving to brush Clarke's offered assistance aside, Anya gritted her teeth against the pain of her wound, schooling her expression into a mask of incomprehensible fury as she hissed a single word:

"Maunon."

That was the only cue they needed to take off into the forest at a dead sprint, Anya leading the way with Clarke and Raven flanking her, Bellamy slightly behind them.

Whoever the attackers were - and however many there were -, they hadn't yet made themselves visible to the foursome, and the back of Clarke's neck began to prickle at the prospect of running from an enemy they couldn't see...

Another gun shot resounded through the air, immediately followed by an agonized grunt from Bellamy.

"Bellamy!!" Clarke shouted over her shoulder, instantly turning on her heels to lope back to her fallen friend - who'd apparently been hit in the left calf from behind.

Two non-fatal shots...

"Clarke, no!!" he cried, putting his hand up in a desperate attempt to stop her as she bent down to support his weight on her shoulders.

Raven had sprinted back to halt on his other side, and Anya stopped a little ways ahead of them with her sword drawn, expression taut with obvious desperation now.

"We must keep moving, Clarke!!" the warrior shouted back to the blonde, working her jaw back-and-forth as her eyes scanned the forest around them wildly. She was pivoting restlessly in defensive circles, her injury all but forgotten as she tried to catch sight of their enemy from any discernible angle.

Just as Clarke and Raven managed to hoist Bellamy evenly between them, the blonde watched as Anya's eyes widened in pure dread at the sight of something not far behind them - something that Clarke didn't dare turn her attention to in that moment.

Loosing a fierce cry of something between agony and defeat, Anya ran back to the three struggling Skaikru, sheathing her sword and moving to Clarke's side to help shoulder Bellamy's body weight.
In a single instance, time seemed to unweave from its traditional setting before her eyes, and Clarke knew that they didn't stand a chance.

The moment the pink smoke began to unfurl around her feet, Clarke felt the crushing weight of a promise now broken - the one whispered around gentle kisses and worshipping touches, the antidote to the most devastating and desperate of pleas...

*Stay with me. Never leave me...*

As Clarke's vision began to swim, she watched from her periphery as both Raven and Bellamy stumbled to their knees, causing the blonde to go down with them, succumbing to wracking coughs before collapsing on the forest floor.

Black spots began to dance in the corners of her vision as she felt more than saw Anya fall by her side, uncharacteristically whimpering in the back of her throat as she hit the ground.

A single agonizing mantra, cycling through her brain to cast itself into the unforgiving abyss as that same darkness crashed back down on top of her...

*I'm so sorry, Lexa.*

With that, everything in Clarke's world faded to black.
Chapter End Notes

.....aaaaand the cliffhangers are back hahahaha
**runs and hides**
Screaming. Someone was screaming.
Too close...

Abrupt silence.

Rattling metal, incessant banging, the clatter of chains against hard surfaces.
More screaming.

Too cold...

Clarke gasped, eyes snapping open as her body heaved against the dizzying effects of some sort of sedative.
The ceiling was too close...
"Clarke!! Clarke, look at me!! Come on, you're okay - shake it off!! Come on, Clarke!!"

She slowly turned her head to the side, searching for the familiar voice, only to be startled by her vision immediately obscured by metal bars - too close...

No... It can't be...

Clarke was in a cage. The small metal box seemed to be elevated off of the ground, one of many that occupied every inch of space against a wall she couldn't see the end of. In fact, she couldn't see much at the moment apart from the cages immediately to her left and right. The only light that filtered into her trap was an eerily dim light tinted blue, giving off the perception of being trapped miles beneath the ocean...
She sat up as if a whip had been cracked across her back, wincing and curling inward as she smacked her head on the top of the metallic trap.
"Oh, thank _god_," that same familiar voice breathed, obviously relieved - and whispering, for some strange reason...

"Raven?" Clarke called back, voice resounding loudly in the space lined with metal. Her eyes still couldn't seem to lock onto the mechanic, swimming blearily with the lingering after-effects...

"Shh, not so loud, Griff!!" Raven answered immediately, all hushed tones of desperate urgency. Clarke closed her eyes for a moment, pulling her knees to her chest and resting her head on them in the attempt to steady herself.

_Breathe through it, Griffin. You can do this..._

She opened her eyes a little to allow herself time to adjust, finally locking onto Raven in the cage directly across the aisle from her. The mechanic was kneeling with both hands gripping the bars, watching Clarke with eyes widened by obvious worry and sheer terror. Clarke's heart lurched to see it.

"Where....are we?" the blonde managed, still struggling against whatever she'd been drugged with, speech slurring a little. Raven clenched her jaw, her mouth forming a hard line for a moment before she spoke.

"No clue," the girl admitted quietly, defeat seeping into her tone as she ground her teeth together. "I can't see much from this stupid box, but we're clearly not alone..."

The mechanic trailed off, voice faltering uncharacteristically as her eyes began to water. Clarke moved so she could match Raven's position near the front of her cage, hands gripping white-knuckled onto the bars. Concern seeped into her expression as she watched her friend begin to unravel before her eyes.

"There are so many of them, Clarke...," the mechanic sniffled, noticeably trembling now - appearing on the verge of a panic attack. "I-I don't know what they're doing to them, but... They're all _dying_, Clarke, I -"

"Breathe, Raven, it's okay," Clarke cooed softly, doing everything she could to keep herself together in front of her clearly-shaken friend. "Just breathe... I'm right here, okay? We're gonna get through this..."

It was then that Clarke made the mistake of scanning her surroundings more closely - a mistake that immediately stole every last shred of sanity from her in a single instant.

In the cage directly to her right was what, under all other circumstances, would've appeared to have been a corpse - except, corpses weren't supposed to be breathing still.

By all medical standards, the boy to her right should've been dead; he was curled into a fetal position facing her, emaciated to the point where Clarke could identify every bone in his body through skin resembling translucent tissue paper. His arms were purpled with bruises on every discernible inch, nearly pulled from their sockets where they held similarly-damaged legs to his chest.

His eyes... Closed though they were, the depth of the blackish circles beneath them were enough to give off the impression of them having been completely hollowed out, and Clarke legitimately gagged at the sight. His cheek bones nearly poked through the skin stretched over his taught face, and the blonde didn't think she could look at him for another second without completely unwinding at the seams.

_They're all dying..._

What kind of soulless monsters would do such a thing to another human being - let alone an entire group of them?! And _why_?!
What was going on?!

Wait a minute...

"Where is -?" Clarke choked, fighting against the bile now rising in her throat. "Where are Anya and Bellamy? Are they -?"

"Here, skai prisa," Anya's voice spoke up suddenly, somewhere off to the right. Oh, thank god...

Clarke scrambled to press herself against the bars of her cage, eyes wildly scanning the cells across the aisle for signs of the warrior. After a moment, her eyes locked onto a hunched over Anya pressed against the bars of her cage directly below Raven's to the right, dried blood coating her arm where her gunshot wound had apparently been left to fester untended. The warrior's eyes were unusually vulnerable as they met Clarke's gaze, obvious relief flashing in them for a brief moment as she looked the blonde over for any sign of injury. Clarke had to choke back a sob.

"Are you alright, Clarke? Raven and I were worried when you wouldn't wake up...," the warrior gulped, hands seemingly gripping even tighter onto the bars. Raven nodded her agreement from up above, expression completely devoid of its usual smugness - only displaying startling concern now.

Clarke rested her forehead against the bars, eyes watering slightly as she loosed a shaky sigh.

Yeah, I...I'm okay - as good as I'm gonna be, I guess," Clarke whispered, closing her eyes against the tears she wouldn't let fall now. "I just... What the hell happened?! Why are we here?! And where on earth is Bellamy? Please tell me he -"

Clarke couldn't finish that statement, eyes snapping open as she began to feel far too much like she was dangling from the edge of a cliff by a single finger...

"We...don't know, Clarke," Anya answered solemnly, struggling to school her expression into stoicism - a last-ditch defense mechanism, it seemed. "He does not respond when we call for him, but he may not be conscious, yet... As for what happened..."

The warrior trailed off, visibly struggling to maintain her composure. Raven's eyes were closed now, tears streaming quietly down her cheeks as she listened.

"We were taken, Clarke. The Maunon, they... They have taken us, and it is all my fault," Anya stated, appearing to be caught in the middle of a storm of inner turmoil where she refused to meet the blonde's heavy gaze, looking anywhere but into oceans of blue.

Clarke was utterly thrown.

"Your fault?" she whispered, incredulous. "How is our being kidnapped your fault, Anya?! There's no way -"

"I am the Commander's head general and her closest advisor," the warrior interrupted the blonde sharply, voice as hard as steel and deathly quiet, devoid of any and all emotion. "The Maunon have loomed over us for as long as our history can recall, preying on our people and watching us like vultures circling dead carcasses... Do you really believe they would be able to maintain such an existence without full knowledge of the very prey they sought to consume? Without having memorized every detail of the faces of those in power - those most capable of putting up an actual fight against them?"

If looks could kill, the bone-chillingly murderous glare Anya fixed off into the distance would have
annihilated an entire civilization by now...

"They are simply following one of the most basic strategies employed in battle: if you cannot capture the leader of your enemy, take the next best thing - the general of its army... I was walking with a target upon my back from the moment I stepped outside of the capitol, and, because of my shortsightedness - and your misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time -, I'm afraid - "

Anya choked off, clenching her jaw against unbidden emotion normally so well-hidden beneath her facade.

"I'm afraid our fight may soon be over."

Clarke's heart plummeted to an unreachable place in that moment, her blood stilling in her veins as dread washed over her in tidal waves.

She had broken her promise...

"So, you're an optimist," Raven spoke up suddenly, eyes still closed where she pressed up against the bars, chuckling humorlessly to herself. "Duly-noted."

Anya fixed a half-hearted glare in the mechanic's general direction, grinding her teeth against her desire to respond.

The three women fell into a tense silence after that, each attempting to keep themselves from falling to pieces in the face of their imminent demise...

"You shouldn't speak in Gonasleng, you know," a female voice suddenly whispered, cutting through the heavy silence and causing all three girls to crane their necks in search of the source. "They always take the ones they think will be most able to understand them - probably to torture them for information..."

Clarke was startled to discover the voice to be coming from the girl in the cage directly beside her on the left, her features rendered indiscernible due to the shadows cast across her face. The blonde sat back on her heels a bit, narrowing her eyes to better appraise the stranger.

"Who are you?" the blonde asked, voice quiet though slightly wary now.

Both Anya and Raven appeared riveted, watching closely as Clarke's neighbor shifted uncomfortably beneath the heavy stares of the three girls.

"I am Eko Kom Azgeda," the woman answered just as quietly.

Anya startled all of them by loosing a menacing growl from her chest at that.

"Azgeda scum," the warrior spat, gritting her teeth at the girl.

Echo seemed wholly unmoved by Anya's hostile display, sighing quietly to herself. Clarke shifted a little awkwardly in her cage.

"If I am scum," Echo whispered, altogether nonchalant and unbothered, "then I am scum who now shares your same fate - who also happens to know what that fate entails..."

"Do enlighten us, then," Raven replied immediately, considerably less hostile than Anya - and genuinely curious.

Clarke focused her attention on the other girl, her interest peaked as dread unfurled in her gut, suddenly very afraid of what she might hear.

Echo sighed once again, seemingly disliking having been put on the spot in such a way.

"First, they will drain you of your blood until your legs can no longer hold you," the girl began, voice as cold as the metal walls of their cages. "It will cycle through their machines to run within the veins of those you cannot see, and most certainly cannot even dream to defeat... Then, while your heart still labors on in your chest, your body will be discarded amongst the corpses of the rest of our
people, soon to become food for the ripa who will consume your flesh while you remain breathing... There is no way out of this."

Clarke's world was spinning, threatening to detach itself from her at any moment now. That feeling of dangling... It was all she had left, as futile as it was. All she could do was hope that the flesh between her nails would be enough to keep her from slipping off the edge... So many questions cycling through her mind at a feverish rate...

*Why?! What the hell was going on?!*

"So, in other words, we're fucked," Raven stated, surprisingly calm for one having just been given a vivid explanation of how they would die. Clarke watched as Anya rolled her eyes, banging her head once against the bars in frustration.

"Must you always turn everything into a trivial *game?!*" the warrior spewed hotly, channeling her overwhelming dread and despair into a much more acceptable outburst of disbelieving outrage. It was much safer that way...

"Oh, you ain't seen *nothin'* yet, your majesty," Raven bit back immediately, jaw working back and forth as she aimed a glare at the floor of her cage - clearly aiming for Anya. "I'm just getting started.. Just you wait - "

"Will you both just *shut the hell up?!*" Clarke interjected suddenly, voice dripping with her own concentrated disdain. Both dissenting women instantly snapped their attention to the furious blonde, eyes widening at having been reprimanded.

"Biting each other's heads off because you can't stand the fact that you're *attracted* to each other isn't going to get us out of these *goddamn cages*!!" The moment it came out of her mouth, Clarke knew she shouldn't have said it, but it was the only branch she was capable of reaching for in that moment - the only explanation for their consistently unreasonable behavior around one another...

Raven instantly paled several shades, eyes widening while her entire body flinched backwards as if she'd been shot. Anya - who actually *had* been shot - simply snapped her jaw shut, stoic facade falling into place as if a switch had been flipped. Echo - and every other prisoner who'd been awakened by the heated exchange, it seemed - shifted awkwardly in her cage once again, uncomfortable with having witnessed the somewhat personal moment. Clarke closed her eyes, leaning against the bars as she fought against her inner turmoil threatening to crush her now.

What was she supposed to do? They had no discernible way out, and no one even knew where they were in the first place... Even if she and her friends did manage to find an escape route for themselves, how were they supposed to free an entire *mountain* full of weakened prisoners?!

Never in her life had Clarke felt so completely and utterly helpless, wishing more than anything that she could be back within the warm embrace of green eyes and soft smiles - the comfort of her heart and soul now so incredibly far from her...

"I'm sorry," Clarke croaked after awhile, voice cracking over her apology as she still refused to open her eyes. "I just... I'm so lost, I - "
"You do not have to apologize, skai prisa," Anya interrupted her, voice surprisingly gentle and comforting now. "You have every right to be outraged - just as the rest of us do... It is how we channel those same emotions that plague us in the hard moments that truly defines who we are."

Clarke's eyes began to water, suddenly overcome with emotion at the warrior's wisdom that reminded her so intensely of her love...

*Why did she have to break her promise?*

Motivated by the all-encompassing need to get back to the one person who'd become her happiness, the separation weighing her down like water filling her lungs, Clarke was suddenly struck by one of the most outrageous ideas she'd ever had. Re-energized by the pure absurdity of it, she whipped around to Echo who was regarding her with a little bit of alarm now.

"What was it you said before - something about them coming in and taking some of us...?" Clarke trailed off, struggling to recall the girl's earlier words.

Echo furrowed her brows in the shadows, expression considering as she struggled to recall.

"That they take the ones they believe will be able to understand them...?" Echo tried, quirking a brow as she regarded Clarke curiously.

The blonde nodded enthusiastically at that, shifting restlessly in her cage now.

"Yeah, that," she affirmed, steeling herself against the insanity of what she was about to attempt.

*Here goes nothing...*

"HEY!!" Clarke shouted suddenly, moving to pound against the bars with her fists. "COME GET ME, YOU ASSHOLES!! COME ON - "

"Clarke!!" Anya hissed, cutting the blonde off as she moved to lean against the bars, expression panicked and wide-eyed. "What on earth do you think you're doing?!"

Raven was fixing her with a similarly incredulous expression, shaking her head a little as if in disbeliefing foreboding. Meanwhile, Echo had recoiled to the darkest corner of her cell, trembling slightly.

Clarke fixed them with a steely expression, body poised as if ready to pounce.

"Improvising," she answered shortly, sitting back to ready her feet against the bars.

"What - no, Clarke!!" Raven implored her urgently, looking like she would've come through the bars to shake the blonde by the shoulders if she could. "They'll kill you!! You can't - "

"What else do you have in mind?!" Clarke yelled back, uncaring about the volume of her voice now. "Listen to me - you have to let me do this now... It's the only way we're going to get anywhere with these people... I need to do this."

Anya's mouth hardened into a firm line, jaw clenching as she considered. Raven was looking back-and-forth between the two of them, mouth agape, as if waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Eyes hardening with the depth of her resolve, Anya nodded after a moment, surprising both Sky Girls beyond belief.

"You are brave, skai prisa - insane, but brave," Anya told her, a look of complete and utter respect overtaking her features now. "I will not forget this."

Clarke nodded once, accepting the high praise from the warrior, honored.

In the time it took for her to blink, Clarke had managed to school her features into a mask of calm
"When they come in," Clarke began, tone switching to one of complete formality and firm authority, "I'm gonna need you to stay quiet. Don't look at me, don't speak to me - don't even act like you know me, for god's sake... No matter what happens - no matter what they do to me - you stay quiet, okay?"

Anyā nodded immediately, moving away from the bars of her cage to recede into the shadows. Raven, on the other hand, looked caught between a rock and a hard place, the picture of anxious uncertainty.

"Clarke..." she trailed off, shaking her head a little bit, eyes wide with fear and a bit of despair peeking through.

Clarke's expression softened, a surge of sympathy coursing through her as she met the gaze of someone who had come to mean so much to her in such a short period of time. She nodded once at the girl, a gesture far too closely resembling a farewell in that moment...

With that, she flipped the switch once more, steadying herself against what was to come. Fueled by every fleeting emotion that had coursed through her since she'd been so unceremoniously stolen from the life she'd come to love, Clarke began to kick the bars and pound the bottom of her cage with all her might, screaming at the top of her lungs as if she'd lost her mind. The noise reverberated through the air in a booming din, painful to anyone with the grave misfortune of having to hear it.

She pounded and yelled until she was legitimately panting with the effort, but she knew she couldn't stop - couldn't allow her life to become one of many flames extinguished so ruthlessly by the breath of the devil.

The sound of metal sliding against metal - doors of some sort, most likely - caused Clarke's heart to race even faster in her chest, bringing her efforts to a fever pitch as she thrashed maniacally in her cage. Multiple pairs of footsteps across concrete floors, one pair clicking as if in pointed shoes...

Nearly startling Clarke into stunned silence, a woman in a pristine white lab coat suddenly appeared before the bars of her cage, flanked by two brutish guards in beige uniforms, faces cast in shadow beneath matching caps. The woman had darker skin and pitch-black hair falling loosely around her shoulders, narrow features currently contorted in curious disdain.

She looked at Clarke as if she were a rabid animal to be subdued and cut into as if in search of the cause of her malfunction - which, all else considered, she probably was.

"I'm assuming you can understand what I'm saying," the woman stated abruptly, voice cold and almost robotic.

The blonde fixed her with a venomous glare. She didn't dare meet the widened eyes of Raven over the woman's shoulder, afraid it would shatter her hardened facade.

"Of course I can," Clarke replied hotly, sounding as if she was grossly offended by the question. Time to put her improvisational skills to the test.

Game on, bitch...

"I've been kept a prisoner by these people for weeks, and this is the kind of reception I get when you finally find me?!"

The woman's eyes flashed with hints of unease and confusion lighting her otherwise carefully-contained expression, and Clarke watched her chin raise almost imperceptibly.

Could this actually work?

"I'm afraid I have no idea what you're talking about," she began, sounding a little too calm all of a sudden. "Regardless, I have no time for such games - "
"Games?!" Clarke interrupted her incredulously, shifting forward to grip onto the bars and noting with satisfaction how the woman nearly flinched back. "I was sent down here to bring a message to your leader, and you think this is a fucking game?!!"

Clarke scoffed, rolling her eyes in exasperation in the attempts to emphasize her point. She tried not to get too caught up in the fierce roaring of blood in her ears...

The woman was glaring at Clarke now, interest obviously peaked as she transferred her weight from one foot to another. 

*This couldn't possibly work...*

"Your affinity for the English language is truly...*impressive*, to say the least," the woman - whose last name, Tsing, was finally discernible on the lapel of her coat - began slowly, clearly aiming for composure. "But, if you think I am going to fall for your silly little act - "

"Oh, *come on,*" Clarke cut her off again, drawling the statement out to give her mind enough time to grasp at a straw that might help her maintain her facade...

Suddenly, it hit her.

She immediately made to pull up the sleeve on the right arm of her tight-fitting training tunic, suddenly thankful for the scar that had caused her a great deal of insecurity over the years. Having captured Tsing's attention with her sudden movements, Clarke held the inside of her right bicep up to the bars of the cage to show the woman, satisfied by the almost-comical widening of her eyes as she took in the small but unsightly indentation left behind by Clarke's contraceptive implant. Her mother had been unable to perform the procedure all those years ago, and Clarke had been forced to bear the scar of the botched implantation at the hands of some unskilled apprentice who'd gotten far too confident in his abilities for anyone's good.

Thankfully for Clarke, her initial guess that these people operated at roughly the same technological capacity as the Ark wasn't too far off...

"*Where* did you get that?!" Tsing whispered, tone hushed with hints of fear and urgency as her eyes darted between Clarke's face and the implant, recognition immediately dawning on her face. Clarke nearly smirked at the woman's sudden change of demeanor, but managed to conceal her smugness with the wave of her brow.

"*Where do you think?* From the space station that has been orbiting this god-forsaken planet for the past *97 years* - *my home,*" Clarke stated coldly, watching as Tsing's mind seemed to begin spiraling before her eyes. "Now, are you going to just stand there and stare at me, or are you going to take me to your leader so that I can deliver my message? A message that could potentially save your *life,* mind you..."

Okay, now she was truly grasping at straws, but what other choice did she have? Truth be told, she still had no idea why the people in the Mountain would want to cage the Grounders up like this in the first place. She hadn't had time to mull over what Echo had told her about the process of them draining every person of their blood, but it all had to mean something, right? Why hide away in a metal-lined fortress, draining innocent people of their life-force, when you possessed clearly superior technology and the ability to live a much more modern existence above ground? For all intents and purposes, they should've wiped the clans out by now... So, with that being the case, why maintain such a meager and undignified existence? Were they truly just *evil?*

"Very well," Tsing finally said, cutting Clarke's train of thought short and surprising the blonde with her suspiciously easy compliance.
It didn’t help that the woman's face was now carefully devoid of all emotions once more...

Before the blonde could even begin to voice a question, the guards were stepping forward to undo the locks on Clarke's cage as Tsing stepped back, emotionless gaze fixed on the younger girl's face the entire time, studying attentively. Clarke allowed herself to be roughly pulled from the inside of her cage elevated off the ground and placed down onto her bare feet without protest, the cold metal of the floor sending chills throughout her entire body. She tried not to look at Raven's frightened expression in her periphery as she was turned towards the left, facing the direction from which Tsing had come and leading away from the collection of cages on both sides of the wall.

Clarke's heart nearly stopped when her gaze fell on the sight a good few feet straight ahead of her.

*Bellamy.*

The boy was dangling from his ankle by a chain attached to the ceiling, dried blood having caked onto his hanging leg in a strange pattern, all while he remained unconscious and stripped of everything but a pair of underwear. He was hooked up to a collection of tubes and wires that ran from both arms to meet a machine that whirred on quietly in the otherwise-eery silence, draining the boy of his blood as he swayed haphazardly with gravity.

*This couldn't possible work...*

Before Clarke could ruin her facade by doing something recklessly stupid in support of her helpless friend, she felt a needle suddenly plunge into the side of her neck, a cold substance being emptied into her veins.

Merely seconds later, the blonde felt the telltale signs of some sort of sedative coursing through her blood and lulling her into a dreamless abyss...

*Please, for the love of god, let this work...*

"I've never seen anything like it before... I-I can't... I don't know how to fully explain it - "

"Give me your best guess, then, Doctor," a man's voice cut her off, sounding strangely pleasant in comparison.

Clarke was lost in a muddled sea of semi-consciousness, only partially-aware of the sensation of quite literally being poked and prodded in multiple locations along her body. Though she wasn't able to open her eyes or even move at all, she recognized the feeling of needles deeply imbedded in the crooks of both arms, sucking the blood from her veins...

"It must be some sort of...*mutation*, sir," the first voice - Tsing, most likely - continued slowly. "An enhancement that allows for a much higher volume of radiation to metabolize in the bloodstream at an astonishing rate... The boy we brought in with her shows the same characteristics."
"Fascinating," the man mused, tone containing that same level of pleasantry as before. "And what of the other girl - the one we could not identify in our databases? Has she been examined?"

"No, sir - not yet... We took note of her legitimate capacity for the English language, though, and we intend to bring her down here shortly to begin testing."

No... Raven.

"Excellent work, Dr. Tsing. We may have found our saving grace, yet..."

She couldn't stand it any longer. Despite the sedative still actively working against her consciousness, Clarke forced her eyes open, wincing at the ridiculous amount of bright white light that assaulted her vision all of a sudden.

The first thing that became blatantly obvious was that she was firmly strapped to some kind of bed by all four of her limbs. The room she was in was all-white, as well, devoid of anything except the bed and medical equipment Clarke was attached to. Glancing down at herself, Clarke noticed that she'd been stripped of her training uniform and now wore some kind of all-white outfit, her feet bare and hair splayed and tickling her shoulders in loose waves.

Before her stomach could fully turn itself over at the thought of the scum living within the confines of the mountain touching her in any way, Clarke's attention was suddenly caught by the two figures standing a couple of feet beyond where she was strapped down. Dr. Tsing stood to the left of an elderly man with short white hair framing a deeply wrinkled face, both wearing expressions somewhere between intense satisfaction and aloof academic interest.

Clarke had to fight the urge to growl at them, feeling more and more like the wild animal they believed her to be... She didn't, though. She wouldn't give these bastards the satisfaction of seeing her become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Better to play the situation out and keep her cool for as long as humanly possible...

It was best to let them do most of the talking. The more information Clarke could gather from them, the better chance she had of maintaining her facade and developing a plan that might be able to get her people out of this...

That thought startled her a little bit, causing her to blink at the two watching figures in surprise. Since when had the Grounders become her people? She was never one to feel much of a sense of belonging anywhere, but, as far as she knew, the Arkers were supposed to be her people... Maybe... Maybe she didn't have to choose. Maybe her mind had made the subconscious fusion the moment she'd fallen in love with the very person capable of uniting both groups. Just, maybe...

"I would address you by your name," the old man began, voice still as pleasant as before. "But, I'm afraid I don't know what it is... I am Dante Wallace, President of Mt. Weather under the guidance of the New Republic. And you are?"

The New Republic? What the hell is that?!
Clarke had a feeling she really didn't want to find out...

She tried not to let her fear and confusion break through the cracks in her facade, but it was immensely difficult beneath the scrutinizing stares of the two adults - not to mention the fact that the forced pleasantry was making her skin crawl.

"Clarke Griffin," she answered flatly, no trace of her current state of mind seeping through. Dante smiled at that, and Clarke couldn't help but note the hints of genuineness peeking through. Strange...
"Welcome, then, Clarke Griffin," he proclaimed, flashing perfectly white teeth in her direction. "We are happy you've arrived."

She was about two seconds away from gnawing through the straps holding her down and lunging at the old man's throat out of sheer discomfort.

*Keep your cool, Griffin... If not for you, then for Raven, Anya, Bellamy, and, most importantly, for Lexa...*

"Now, before we go much further here, I'd like to hear this message that you've apparently been so determined to deliver me."

*Oh, no...*

This was the precise moment Clarke had been hoping to postpone for as long as possible, but it seemed that the sliver of hope fueled by blind luck she been gleaming was dissolving right before her very eyes...

What could she say to him? Did she even know enough about these people to believably pull off such a fallacy?

What *did* she know?

For starters, she knew that they were using Grounder blood - the cause for which she could now discern had something to do with the way their bodies were able to metabolize radiation in comparison to those who lived within the Mountain. She knew they were under the guidance of some so-called "New Republic," and that their technology seemed to be on-par with that of the 22nd Century technology the Ark relied on. She also figured that their fortress of inhumane torture was secured to the hilt with weapons of mass-destruction capable of decimating any dissenting force that came close to its perimeter...

With that being the case, why did they need to hide away like this when their weaponry gave them the advantage of a thousand armies to the Grounders' consolidated one?

Suddenly, a lightbulb went off.

These people needed the Grounders - or, more specifically, needed their blood. Why go to the trouble of corralling and kidnapping every person they could get their hands on if not for such a purpose? When Echo spoke of the machines cycling the Grounders' blood into the veins of those unseen... They must be using the blood as some sort of treatment, keeping them at an even keel to sustain the increased levels of radiation in the atmosphere that would otherwise prove toxic within their bloodstream, for whatever reason.

That's why they hadn't just gone and wiped the Grounders out, in the first place - the Mountain needed them to survive.

As if by divine intervention, another key piece snapped itself into place within the dangerous puzzle of her mind - a piece that immediately became the seed of a ridiculously risky proposal in-the-making...

Dr. Tsing's earlier words now clicked much more logically for the blonde. *Of course* Clarke, Bellamy, and Raven's blood metabolized radiation at an unprecedented rate: they'd grown up on a *space station*, for god's sake, orbiting the largest source of radiation known to humankind. As the years had gone by, the systems of those living on the Ark must have evolved to develop the so-called mutation, making it possible for future generations to be born and thrive in the new environment without perishing from a wide variety of cancers and lesions. Their bodies most likely possessed the capability to metabolize radiation at a rate that seemed superhuman even when compared to those who'd grown up within the confines of Earth's noxious atmosphere...

This was what she'd been looking for. *This* was her angle.

If she could somehow give Wallace a proposal he couldn't refuse... Well, at the very least, it would buy her friends more time.
Clearing her throat, Clarke prepared to break the stretching silence, feeling on the edge of that same precipice once again.

Placing the fate of her friends and the lives of potentially hundreds more within the Mountain upon the weakened back of a far-fetched lie was making her heart stutter painfully in her chest, but she didn't see any other options at this point...

"I come bearing a message from my Chancellor," she stated flatly, voice carefully calm and devoid of any telling emotion as she fixed Dante with a cold stare.

The man returned it in kind, turning his head a little and cocking a brow in peaked interest. "The Ark would like to offer its assistance in the decimation of the Commander's forces, and we will provide any weapons necessary in exchange for supplies and safe refuge upon landing."

If her stomach heaved at the mere mention of betraying Lexa in such a way, Clarke didn't show it. She only stared on, mask firmly in place, waiting for everything and nothing to crumble before her eyes...

Dante's lips pursed for a moment, and Clarke was surprised to notice Dr. Tsing's jaw working back-and-forth where she stood beside the man.

Before Clarke could even begin to get her hopes up that she might be gaining some ground, Dante spoke again.

"We are perfectly capable of handling the Commander's forces with our current armory, Clarke," he told the blonde steadily, sounding nearly regretful for whatever reason as he moved to clasp his arms behind his back. "Why should we accept the burden of additional mouths to feed if our only benefit is a slight increase in the number of missiles at our disposal? Surely, you see the gross illogic in that..."

He trailed off, fixing her with an expectant gaze as Tsing's expression turned into a smug grin Clarke wanted to claw off the woman's features.

"If you kill all the Grounders, who's going to be your blood bag?" Clarke inquired, voice deadly quiet now.

The effect of her question was immediate: Dante paled, taking an unconscious step back as he unclasped his arms to hang them uncomfortably by his sides while Tsing's face contorted in several degrees of panic and surprise.

Clarke could've keened at how happy their reactions made her, but she withheld out of sheer will. This was the moment she'd been waiting for, and she was going to capitalize on it in every conceivable way before it passed her by.

"You think I haven't figured out your little operation here?" Clarke asked, feigning confidence by hiding behind intermingled disgust and disbelief. "I must say, given the amount of evolution that should've taken place since the end of the world, I would've thought you'd be smarter..."

Clarke shrugged, fighting harder than ever to contain her grin at the bewildered expressions on the two adults' faces.

"Tell me, if you annihilate your supply, what happens to all of you? Do you simply have to rot away in your underground cages for the rest of your natural lives, or will your skin slowly start to blister and peel off from exposure to more and more radiation? I really am curious..."

Dante and Tsing exchanged a glance with one another, clearly stunned by Clarke's change in demeanor, the way that she now commanded their attention as if she, alone, held their fate in her hands. If she could get them to believe that she actually did, she might just have a chance...
"No matter," she continued, eager not to let her moment slip away. "Thankfully, my people can offer a solution to your inability to think things through... I'm assuming you've tested my blood, seen how unique its properties are?"

At this point, Clarke's confidence was either going to shoot her in the foot or save her from imminent and immediate doom... There were really no other alternatives.

Tsing narrowed her eyes instantly, taking a step forward and somewhat recovering her mask of medical interest.

"Your blood metabolizes radiation at a rate of approximately ten times that of those who grew up exposed to this planet's toxicity," Tsing stated, immediately jumping to the point and taking another step forward. Her expression was completely controlled now, Dante watching with a clenched jaw from slightly behind her.

"It is... completely unprecedented..."

"Everything is unprecedented until the first time it happens, isn't it?" Clarke cut in sharply, raising a brow in her otherwise stoic facade. She wasn't going to let her flash of confidence fade away while the woman rambled on...

Tsing's mouth snapped shut, struck momentarily speechless while Dante eyed Clarke with a curious amount of intrigue all of a sudden.

"As I was saying," Clarke continued, feigning annoyance at having been interrupted, "if you've tested my blood, then I'm assuming you've been able to figure out why that is... Growing up in near-constant exposure to the sun's radiation can probably do that to a person over time, don't ya think? That being said..."

Clarke cleared her throat, slightly nervous all of a sudden as her mind was thrown into overdrive at the prospect of making the proposal on the tip of her tongue - the proposal that she'd had all of five minutes to think through. Dante and Tsing seemed to be holding their breath now, which only made Clarke's heart hammer harder at the gravity of the moment...

"Go for the kill, Griffin.

"On behalf of the Ark Station under the leadership of Chancellor Thelonius Jaha, I am offering the blood of thousands of my people - as well as assistance in the destruction of the Grounder armies - in exchange for protection and sanctuary upon their arrival to the ground - on one condition... You will release the current Grounder prisoners you have in exchange for the immediate donation of my blood - no questions asked... Their presence is no longer needed and, frankly, it's insulting to me that you would seek to prolong their suffering in such a way... Your procedures are barbaric, at best, and - if I may be frank - the Ark does not take kindly to savages."

Clarke didn't know where this spark of insanity came from - nor did she recognize the sound of her own voice as it left her lips -, but the words were out of her before she could even hope to ruminate on the ramifications of what her promises would mean.

That feeling of hanging from the edge of a precipice was threatening to envelop her completely now...

"Why does it matter to you if those animals are released now if we're going to simply wipe them out in one fell-swoop later?!" Tsing spat incredulously, taking an ambitious step forward as Dante stayed back, expression calm and considering.

Clarke fought off the urge to scream as she sat up, pulling against her restraints as much as possible with a positively murderous expression on her face.

"Did you not hear what I just said?!" she seethed lowly, noting with pleasure as Tsing took an involuntary step back at the blonde's open hostility. "Do you really believe the Ark will be willing to donate our blood to a horde of torturous lunatics?! If I do recall correctly, this entire mess of an
operation is contingent upon the fact that you can't survive radiation!!"
Clarke was legitimately yelling now, and Tsing had backed up all the way to the door at this point -
all while Dante remained frozen in place, watching Clarke devolve into a rabid beast of fury.

"The only reason you and your people are even alive right now is because you've relied on the
technology you happened to be lucky enough to be born possessing - which you've chosen to use to
torture those who've actually earned their right to survive on this fucking planet!!" Clarke was fueled
by pure rage at this point, her vision tinged in red as she barred her teeth at the two adults.
"You all make me sick, and I, for one, would be completely content to let each and every one of you
rot in hell for the rest of eternity..." Clarke trailed off, feeling the sudden need to regain some of her
composure for the sake of maintaining legitimacy. Taking a deep breath, she continued.
"But, as it so happens, my leaders seem to think it will be more valuable to us to form new alliances
instead of burning old bridges - if only for the sake of preserving some semblance of humanity...
This seemed to catch Dante's attention for some reason, and now it was his turn to take a step
forward, guided by his overwhelming captivation all of a sudden.

"You will let them go - give them a moment of peace with their families before their final demise, if
you will... It's really the least you can do after all of the decades of torment, in my opinion... Only
then will my people even consider helping you."

"Help us?!" Tsing cried incredulously, taking an aggressive step forward, fists clenched. "How dare
you -"

"Enough," Dante commanded suddenly, moving to stand slightly in front of a stunned Tsing now.
The doctor regarded him with a slack jaw, struck momentarily speechless by the unyielding tone of
his voice.

"Clarke is right," he stated much more quietly now - though his voice remained just as firm - nearly
stopping the blonde's heart as Tsing began to sputter right before her eyes.
He held up a hand to stop whatever fervent line of protest she was about to embark upon, rolling his
shoulders back and commanding every ounce of authority in the white room.
"Our existence has been contingent upon the...sacrifice of others for as long as I can recall... I have
never been particularly fond of the way we survive, and I have made that clear on numerous
occasions - as has the High Council, I might add."
Tsing's eyes were darting wildly between Clarke and the president now, mouth agape as she looked
on the verge of some sort of panic attack. Dante's gaze remained firmly glued to the blonde as she
tried with everything within her power to keep the utter shock she was feeling from showing on her
face.
This couldn't possibly work... Could it?

"As no other alternative to our method of survival had presented itself until now, I found it easier
to...justify to a certain degree. But, now - " he swallowed, jutting his chin out further in an attempt to
muster confidence. "Now, we have another option..."
Dante was smiling now, appearing as if some kind of proverbial weight had been lifted from his
shoulders, strangely enough.
"We will release the prisoners immediately. They will be free to return to their lands on the promise
that you allow us to run some...precautionary tests on your system, if you will." Dante moved to rest
both hands on the metallic footboard of Clarke's bed, the smile still evident on his otherwise serene
features. It calmed her for some reason, while simultaneously making her feel as if she were hanging
above a bottomless abyss capable of swallowing her soul in a single instance - a strange dichotomy,
to say the least.
Tsing, on the other hand, looked as though she might faint, her face flushed and limbs short-
circuiting as she gawked at her leader - who seemed to have completely tuned her out at this point.
"Given the...gravity of this decision, I will need more time to discuss its ramifications with the High Council... Only after that conversation will I decide how to approach communication with your people going forward."

Dante walked around to stand beside Clarke, and the blonde shrunk back almost involuntarily at his proximity - a move which caused the old man to frown in displeasure before he continued.
"Until then, know that I will remain true to my word and release the captives without further harm... We are truly grateful for this opportunity at new life, and, if I may..."

The old man leaned closer, breath tickling Clarke's left ear as he began to whisper just loud enough for her, alone, to hear:
"I must thank you for appealing to my...human sensibilities, Clarke... Don't make me regret acting upon them."

Before Clarke could even react to the thinly-veiled threat, an overwhelming sense of drowsiness began to wash over her. She barely noticed Dante removing his hand from a computerized panel behind her headboard, the sedative now seeping into her veins like a sugary syrup, enticing her into darkened depths once more...

The last thing she noted was the anxiously hushed tones of Tsing seemingly admonishing Dante as the two quickly made their way from the room.

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Green eyes, glistening with unshed tears, dancing with pure adoration and devotion... Worshipful touches, soft smiles, gentle laughter...
As long as you promise to stay with me, hodnes...

I love you.

---

What felt like merely a second later, Clarke's eyes snapped open to the same bright light as before. She groaned, blinking rapidly to adjust to the harsh sensation.

Before she could take stock of herself and even begin to attempt to process everything that had happened, her unfocused eyes locked onto a singular figure standing in stark contrast to the blankness of the rest of the room.

A person in a full-bodied, light blue hazmat suit of some kind stood with a mop and bucket in hand, seemingly frozen in place just a mere few feet from Clarke's bed for some reason. Upon closer examination, Clarke discerned the face of a girl with curly dark hair gaping at the blonde with wide and fearful eyes through the layer of plastic shielding her features.

Meanwhile, Clarke still couldn't seem to get her wits about her. Her strength seemed to have left her body completely, her limbs heavy and useless and her head inclined to lull over to the side in search of restful purchase - a product of the combined effects of the sedative and the amount of blood being filtered out of her system at a steady rate, it seemed.

Just as Clarke opened her mouth to speak, the girl shook her head furiously beneath her suit, eyes widening almost comically all of a sudden. Angling her body away from the door on the opposite side of the room for whatever reason, she held a gloved finger to her lips, miming an imperative gesture of silence. Clarke's brows furrowed slightly, suspicious of this new visitor and her commands, but she couldn't quite bring herself to voice her discontent.
Huffing something like defeat and acceptance of an inevitably torturous demise, Clarke lulled her head back up to stare blankly at the ceiling.
Dante's agreement to her proposal had felt... Well, frankly, it'd felt too easy. The fact that she'd had to piece everything together on the fly, never giving herself any time to process each part of the puzzle as she created it and stuck it into place, had created a gnawing sensation in her gut.
Questions began to spin rapidly through her mind... Dante had to have figured there was a good chance of Clarke bluffing in some form or another, so why had he so easily agreed to free his peoples' only chance at sustainable life on the mere acceptance of her terms and conditions? Was he that confident in his ability to take what he needed from Clarke's word, alone? More importantly, what would keep him from annihilating the Grounders the moment they stepped out of the Mountain? After all, their presence on this Earth would no longer be necessary in his mind, so what would keep him from pulling the trigger? There had to be something she was missing here... The entire encounter had left her feeling drained, confused, and wholly disbelieving that the president would legitimately stick to his word.
She felt more discombobulated than she ever had in her entire life, and all she wanted - no, all she needed - was Lexa. She needed her touch, her soft voice - even her smell, for god's sake... She needed her love, and she needed her now. Her chest felt empty, her soul drained. The distance from her heart had seemingly hollowed her out completely, and she felt the sharp edges of despair begin to scrape mercilessly at the inside of her rib cage.
Suddenly, Clarke became more concerned with surviving the agonizingly visceral longing currently overtaking her than she was with whatever the Mountain had planned for her. Let them poke and prod her, let them drain her of every drop of blood she had to offer - hell, let them carve every vital organ from her body. At this point, she was certain that no amount of physical pain could rival that which her mind and empty chest were wracking her body with in this moment.
Who needs the seventh circle of hell when you've been consumed by the scorching flames within your own mind?

So wrapped up in her agony as she was, Clarke didn't even notice the girl walk up to stand beside her until she heard the sound of heavy breathing against thick plastic. She didn't bother to turn her head as the girl bent to whisper quietly in her ear.

"Don't worry, I'm not gonna hurt you."
As if you could cause me any more pain than I'm already in...
"My name is Maya, and I-I'm here to help..."
Clarke slowly turned to look Maya in the eyes, expression deadened by the depth of her despair. Maya seemed to blanch under the coldness of Clarke's stare, but she recovered quickly, seemingly steeling herself in determination to say her piece.

"I don't know who you are or where you're from, but I just... I thought you'd wanna know that he - "
Maya seemed to choke on her words, struggling against a lump in her throat now. "He let them go. All of them... He just...let them go..."
Clarke's interest was immediately peaked, and she abruptly turned her body as much as possible beneath her restraints to more properly look at the other girl, eyes narrowed. Maya seemed startled by Clarke's sudden vitality, taking a frightened step back before collecting herself under the blonde's scrutinizing gaze.

"The prisoners?" Clarke pressed, voice hoarse with exhaustion and strain. "Dante let the prisoners go? H-he let Anya go?!"
The desperation in Clarke's voice was beyond pathetic and bridging on delusional, but she didn't care. Surely, Dante wouldn't have let the Commander's head general go so easily, would he? She had to know...

Maya fixed her with a confused expression, lips pursing for a moment while she spared a quick
glance towards the door, seemingly fearful of being caught.
"I don't... I don't know who Anya is, but if she's one of the prisoners then, yeah... They let her go..."
Maya swallowed, uncomfortable all of a sudden. Her expression made the blonde's stomach
somersault in something like anxious dread at whatever she had to say next.
"Well... They let them all go except..." She gulped again, pointedly fixing her gaze away from
Clarke as the blonde struggled against her restraints with the overwhelming desire to shake the girl
by the shoulders.
"Except for two of them... A guy and a girl, both with dark hair a-and tan skin... They... Well, I think
they're in the rooms next to yours, but I'm not completely sure, I..." Maya trailed off, gaze now
trained at the floor.

Clarke felt as if she'd been kicked in the chest, all the air forced from her already-heaving lungs.
*Raven and Bellamy... No. They hadn't been part of the deal...*

A surge of anger hit her so hard she was afraid she legitimately flinched at its impact. Shaking her
head a little, she leaned as close to Maya as possible, expression seething and venomous.
The moment Maya looked up to meet the blonde's gaze, her eyes widened in terror and she took
another step back, hands going up in a defensive position.

"What are they doing to them?!!" Clarke hissed, struggling against her restraints and nearly on the
verge of gnashing her teeth.
When Maya fixed her with a terrified expression, words unforthcoming, Clarke legitimately growled
at the poor girl.
"ANSWER ME, GODDAMNIT!!" she roared, uncaring about whoever might hear at this point. Her
vision was red, her pulse racing - the epitome of the unhinged savagery these people seemed to fear
so much...

Maya closed her eyes for a moment, seemingly schooling her expression and preparing herself to
step back into Clarke's line of fire for whatever reason. The blonde was nearly foaming at the mouth
at this point...

"Look, all I know is that they're hooked up to the same kinda machines that you are, and they're both
unconscious at the moment," Maya told her, voice low and even more urgent than before. Clarke's
chest continued to heave, and - as sad as it was - she found that she was mostly just relieved to hear
that her friends were temporarily unable to expose her lie. She'd have to figure out how to fill them in
sooner rather than later, though...
"Like I said before, I'm here to help you guys because I... I think what my people have been doing to
your people is - " Maya choked again, seemingly trembling beneath her hazmat suit now as her eyes
appeared nearly crazed with passionate fervor. "Well, it's just wrong, and I... I'm gonna help you in
every way I know how."

Clarke was thrown by that. Why would she...? No, this was too good to be true. Yet another
suspicious quandary to add to her growing list...
"Why should I trust you?" Clarke questioned, voice deadly calm and quiet as she continued to
appraise the frightened girl. "Why should I believe a single word that comes out of your mouth?!"

Much to her surprise, Maya straightened from her slight crouch, rolling her shoulders back as her
face set in blind determination. Clarke was even more confused now, her heart stuttering unevenly in
her chest...

"Because..." Maya began, clearly struggling despite having embraced a facade of confidence. She
shook her head a little, attempting to pull herself out of the path of an oncoming spiral threatening to
snag her in its path.
"Because, what I'm going to tell you, it - " she gulped, closing her eyes as if it were the only way for her to finish her statement now.

"It will mean the end of my people if we succeed."

Chapter End Notes

As you can see, I've clearly taken creative liberties with this haha. Hope you don't mind too much - I definitely plan on tying up any loose ends I've now created...

Questions, comments, concerns? (;
Echo had been right.

It felt like they'd taken nearly every drop of blood she had, and now Clarke couldn't even hope to stand on her own. The fact that they'd knocked her out only hours before to drill into her hip for bone marrow didn't help the situation, either...

Time had long since slipped away from her, and Clarke couldn't even begin to guess how long she'd been stuck inside the Mountain - a week? Ten days? As she'd been forced to forego normal human habits in favor of a much more animalistic and all-around degrading existence, it'd become increasingly difficult to discern days from nights - and everything in between, for that matter.

She was only ever allowed to sleep for what felt like minutes at a time - only ever given enough food and water to keep her from succumbing to extreme malnutrition -, often interrupted by Tsing or one of her assistants as they'd come to conduct one invasive test on her body after another. Though she'd known upon agreeing to Dante's "precautionary tests" that it would most likely result in her being treated like a common lab rat, she'd had no idea the kind of hellish treatment she'd be subjected to upon her cooperation...

Not only did they have her hooked into the blood-sucking machine for what felt like every minute of the day, but they also deemed it necessary to simultaneously subject her to everything from forced urine samples to - on one particularly torturous occasion - electroshock therapy to "see how her system would handle the distress." She'd complied relatively easily at first, taking the extensive tests in stride in the interest of preventing further questions from being asked. As they continued to get worse, though, Clarke began to realize that it corresponded directly with her dwindling level of strength: the weaker she got, the worse the tests seemed to be...
The combination of a loss of conceptualized time and constant captivity with the physical deterioration of her body was enough to leave Clarke on the brink of insanity, constantly towing a line that humans were never meant to discover, in the first place. She could no longer rely on her mind to formulate clever schemes or think up ways around the Mountain Men's various methods of torture.

She'd resigned herself to simply hoping to survive the coming hours with all of her limbs in tack...

Her only saving grace in this unique personification of hell was Maya. The girl would visit her as often as she could, often providing snippets of information she'd been able to glean from eavesdropping on important conversations.

Maya's first priority had been informing Raven and Bellamy of Clarke's elaborate lie and the precarious scheme that they'd come up with as a result of it, the entire scenario seeming insane at best and purely suicidal at worst. Clarke's friends had immediately agreed to comply in any way they knew how, mostly resigning themselves to silence in favor of preventing any cracks in the delicate facade from forming. Besides that, Maya had been able to find out little bits and pieces that Clarke couldn't quite fit together in her current state of mind, but decided to store away for potential future use regardless.

For instance, the girl had learned that the so-called New Republic provided supplies and advanced tech to the Mountain on a bi-monthly basis, as well as providing them with maps of the underground labyrinths they'd created to inch further and further into Grounder territory. Apparently, they maintained their existence in some sort of pristine city far from any lands Clarke would be familiar with, behaving as something like gods amongst men, but the blonde wasn't sure what she'd be able to do with that information in her current predicament...

Maya had also managed to overhear a conversation between Dante and one of the head guards about the progress of the Grounder prisoners back into their territory, learning that the group of them had seemingly made it safely beyond the Mountain's reach for the time-being.

Though Clarke was immensely relieved to hear it, that progress was immediately overshadowed by the sheer insanity of the plan they'd formulated only days before.

As it stood, everything they'd discussed seemed entirely contingent upon the Mountain not establishing contact with the Ark. If that happened, Clarke and her friends were almost certainly guaranteed a much more painful death than the one they were currently on the path towards once their lies were exposed and the Arkers proved unwilling to cooperate. Even worse, the only other possible alternative to that would be if the Ark actually did form an alliance with the Mountain, essentially removing control from Clarke's hands and ensuring the full-scale genocide of every last Grounder on Earth.

With that being the case, timing was more crucial than ever, and Clarke had none. She couldn't even begin to guess when the most opportune moment to act would be, and was forced to rely solely on Maya's vague mutterings of "not quite yet" and "soon."

How ironic it was that Clarke now relied on whispered promises of hope as her lifeline when she'd only just recently broken a more sacred set of promises of her own...
Why did she have to break her promise?

What scared her even more than her circumstances, though, was the actual plan, itself...

Maya had presented Clarke with three options - all of them contingent upon their ability to break into the Mountain's technological mainframe, which seemed an insurmountable obstacle all on its own.

The first option: have Raven hack into the Mountain's ventilation system and reverse the outside thrusters, effectively irradiating every level of the underground fortress with toxic air. While this option seemed like their safest bet - as tragic as that sounds -, it was now obsolete due to the fact that the recently-discovered bone marrow treatments had proven to be the permanent fix the Mountain Men had been searching 97 years for, and were now being distributed to lord knows how many people as quickly as Clarke and her friends' bodies could heal to produce more.

The second option: break into Dante's office, pray that they found the self-destruct code written down somewhere, and enter the digits into the mainframe to trigger an automated self-destruct sequence that would bring the entire Mountain crumbling down. In addition to the fact that this plan was dependent on the code actually being written down - a possibility which seemed as far-fetched as their probability of making it out alive -, it also left a one-minute grace period before detonation during which it would be possible for evacuations to take place. That ensured that at least some of the Mountain Men made it out alive, which created a few too many wildcards than Clarke was prepared to deal with.

The final option, the most dangerous for them all: activate the fail-safe mechanism in the mainframe that would result in the total extinction of the Maunon. The fail-safe - apparently created by the first generation of Mountain Men after the end of the modern world - was, essentially, a protection system modeled after that of the Center for Disease Control and experimentation used in the old world. In this case, it was intended to ensure that humanity would be guaranteed a relatively painless demise for whatever reason - a last-ditch weaponized defense system against the fallacies of the human race, in a sense. When triggered, it immediately releases an undetectable gas into the air that puts all those in the vicinity into a near-comatose state. After that, a five-minute countdown begins during which the system prepares itself to deploy High-Impulse Thermobaric Fueler Explosives that operate on a two-stage aerosol ignition, combining with oxygen to generate a blast-wave more powerful than any other weapon short of a nuclear bomb.

Essentially, it sets the air on fire.

The only reason that Maya even knew of these options, in the first place, was because her father had been a part of the president's inner circle at one point. According to the girl, he'd eventually gotten to a point where he couldn't take it anymore, refusing to be a part of an executive body that exploited innocent people for the sole purpose of keeping them all alive - a direct defilement of nature, in his mind. The moment he left, he'd immediately informed his wife and daughter of the kidnappings and killings of the Grounders for their sake, a process that they all knew existed but hadn't really gotten an explicit explanation of. He'd also told them of the various destruction mechanisms available to be used against the Mountain, and both Maya and her mother had memorized every conceivable aspect of each plan in case of emergency.

Though she'd never even entertained the thought of using any of them, Maya's mind was changed
the moment her mother was killed for refusing to accept the blood treatments not so many years ago. Ever since then, she and her father had dedicated their time to plotting against Dante and the other barbaric higher-ups under his jurisdiction. Nothing had ever come to fruition, no options readily available to them - until Clarke and her friends, that is.

Now, it was an emergency.

Clarke could understand how she and her friends might've become a sort of catalyst for action - a means to an end, even -, but what she couldn't seem to wrap her head around at first was why?

Why would Maya be so willing to help them escape the Mountain if it meant she had to sacrifice herself and everyone she cared about in the process?! Would anyone so readily go to their death in the hopes of giving some random strangers a chance?!

But then it'd hit her: Maya wasn't doing this for Clarke - or even for the spirit of her mother, for that matter. She, like many other crucial figures in human history now long gone, was doing this for the sake of humanity - for her soul. She was doing this because someone had to pay the price of generations of injustice, of unthinkable cruelty fueled by the assumption that one life mattered more than another simply because it happened to have begun under privileged circumstances.

*It is always the purest of heart who bear the brunt of such grievances - for their souls simply have the cleanest slate, the most room to house the sins of those who are truly guilty...*

Lexa's words seemed to cycle through her mind now, haunting Clarke almost as viscerally as the memories of worshipful touches on innocent, malleable skin now riddled with cracks and bruises. Though, nothing, it seemed, could haunt the blonde nearly as much as the thought of what her inevitable demise would do to the person who'd place her heart and soul in the hands of someone whose life now burned on an ember as fleeting as the spark of a dying flame...

Ultimately, Clarke knew that the odds were completely stacked against her in every conceivable way. Even if an opportunity to escape actually presented itself, she didn't even trust her legs to be able to carry her fast enough to escape anything. For her part - and regardless of whether or not she actually made it out alive -, Maya was willing to make whatever sacrifices were necessary to save Clarke and her friends in the first place, and that was what truly mattered to the blonde. But she still didn't see how it could possibly work now...

The marrow treatments were more draining than anything Clarke had ever been forced to endure, and she'd only agreed to them on the condition that any children living within the Mountain be given the first set of transfusions. Though she knew it was simply her way of compensating for her guilt at what she was planning, it gave her a strange sense of comfort to buy into the delusion that she might get to save them if given the chance... Dante had enthusiastically agreed, of course, though the blonde knew he'd probably use the first doses on himself at the bequest of Tsing and his insufferable son, Cage - who Clarke had, thankfully, only had to encounter once so far during her time in captivity.
Regardless of the option she chose, Clarke had begun to accept the fact that she would most likely not make it out of this whole thing alive. If she did, her soul was damned either way, so what did it matter?

Faced with her impending damnation, Clarke had managed to whittle the crux of her existence down to a single phrase, the result of a broken promise that would inevitably bury her far deeper than any amount of blackness ever would...

*I must go where you cannot follow*.

Everything seemed to fall apart at once.

One minute, Clarke was staring blankly up at the white ceiling - coming to terms with her own limited mortality, no doubt; the next, Maya was bursting through the door of her room, the hazmat suit nowhere to be found as she fixed the blonde with a look of sheer terror. Had Clarke not forfeited most of the blood in her veins and been drilled into for multiple hours at a time that day, she might've been more alarmed at the girl's intrusion. As it were, though, she simply raised a halfway curious eyebrow, otherwise unmoving, as Maya barreled towards her.

"Clarke, we've gotta go *now*!!" Maya hissed, trembling hands moving to disconnect the various tubes from the blonde's body. There had been no need to restrain her in any other way, as she was too weak to even turn over in bed now...

"*Come on*, Clarke, you've gotta help me here!!" Maya pleaded urgently, removing the last tube from the blonde's right arm and slipping both of her own beneath Clarke's back in the attempt to hoist her into a sitting position.
For her part, Clarke seemed to be stuck in a semi-conscious daze, her limbs wholly leaden and uncooperative as bright spots danced in her vision. She felt like she was almost floating, her mind seemingly having disconnected from her dying body at some point in the process - as easily shaken as the flame of a candle on the breath of the wind.

"Clarke, if we don't go now, I won't be able to help you anymore!!" Maya implored her desperately, grunting with the effort to support the blonde who was like gelatin in her grasp, leaning completely against her frame now.

Clarke was still unresponsive, staring straight ahead of her as she fought against unconsciousness.

"Please, Clarke!! Raven and Bellamy can't do this without you!!"

At the mention of her friends' names, Clarke whipped around to look at Maya, a surge of adrenaline suddenly coursing through her.

"Where...are they?" Clarke rasped out, struggling against a dry throat and unimaginable fatigue.

Maya's eyes widened a little where they met exhausted blue, momentarily relieved that the blonde was finally responding to her.

Before she could answer, though, another figure dressed in the beige uniform of the guards came barreling through the door, running up to Clarke's bedside without hesitation. Clarke barely had time to flinch before the figure ripped off his hat, revealing a ghastly pale-looking boy with messy hair - about their age - dripping with sweat underneath.

Clarke's blood roared feverishly in her ears at the realization that they'd seemingly been caught already.

"Neither of them can walk, Maya," he began, ignoring Clarke as he met Maya's gaze, expression pulled taut and slightly panicked. "I can't carry them both at the same time..."

Maya whimpered a little bit where she continued to hold Clarke, and the blonde found herself fighting the strange urge to wrap her arms around the girl in the hopes of providing comfort. It was instinctual and, had she not been completely dead-weight, she might've given into it.

As it were, she could only stare up at the frizzy-haired girl as she seemed to be waging an internal battle all of a sudden. Then, after a heavily-weighted moment, Maya looked down at Clarke, lips pursed and eyes brimming with tears, before clenching her jaw and seemingly steeling herself against something.

"It'll just have to be them, then. No one else," she told the boy flatly, voice quivering a little.
Clarke didn't have to look at the boy to see his reaction, as he loosed a sharp intake of breath at her words.

"But, Maya - "

"No, Thomas," she cut him off, seemingly gaining confidence now. "This isn't about any of us anymore... It can't be."

The boy, Thomas, simply sighed, resigning himself to whatever it was he and Maya were about to attempt. Clarke was beyond confused...

Before she could work up the strength to voice a question, the blonde suddenly felt herself being hoisted into Thomas's strong arms, the boy taking off at a run with Maya at his heels. The movement was exceptionally jarring after so long spent sedentary, and Clarke had to close her eyes against increasing nausea as her delicate frame was jostled and bumped against Thomas's sturdy frame.

She knew she should've asked where they were taking her and what, for that matter, was going on. She knew... But her strength was gone, her fight having left her what felt like a lifetime ago, hope as fleeting as the breaths her lungs hungered for at this point.

Though she tried to fight it, Clarke couldn't seem to shake off the strange reality of weaving in and out of unconscious, the sensation dragging her down into an area of her psyche that she was no more comfortable with than the confines of the Mountain, itself. It was a place where all sound seemed to be registered through the din of a long metallic tube, a place where her limbs felt as heavy as stone and ached with visceral sharpness.

Clarke didn't know where Thomas and Maya were taking her, and she found that she cared less and less with every passing minute. She was no longer in the position to want anything, too far gone to be granted such a luxury. To need, though... Clarke had become very familiar with need at this point.

As long as you stay with me...

She felt as if she were drifting out into a wide expanse of calm water, bobbing weightlessly atop the surface beneath and endless scattering of stars - two stars shining more brightly than the rest, cast in a green glow as they promised to reveal every beautiful secret in the universe, every good memory ever to be made. They called to her like nothing else ever had, promising to wash her in their light if she only got closer... Clarke bet could reach them, if only she could just try hard enough -

"Clarke?" A familiar voice snapped her back into reality, pulling at her consciousness with startling command.
The blonde blinked, disoriented and dizzy as she attempted to take in her surroundings.

They were in some sort of control room, a wall of screens staring Clarke in the face and casting a bluish glow in the otherwise darkened room. A large panel containing many glowing buttons and switches sat atop a table stationed a few feet in front of the screens, a single chair currently occupied by the person who'd apparently called Clarke's name.

As soon as the blonde's eyes locked onto the figure now turned and gawking at her, her heart fell into her stomach, her breath hitching with something like immense relief mixed with immediate and impending tragedy.

*Raven.*

The mechanic locked onto to Clarke's eyes, tears pooling in her own hollowed out by severe malnourishment and deprivation nearly on par with the blonde's. Her lips parted in surprise and she gasped, attempting to get up from her chair and move towards her friend, wholly unsuccessful as her legs buckled out from beneath her. Clarke's heart plummeted even further when she realized that her friend was just as weak as she was.

They would never get out of this alive...

"Rae," Clarke rasped, reaching weakly in Raven's general direction, needing comfort, solace, *anything*.

A sob ripped from the mechanic's chest as Thomas placed the blonde on the floor beside her, Raven looking down at Clarke with so much unbridled emotion that it was almost too much for either of them to bear. Seemingly without thinking, Raven moved to unceremoniously collapse out of the chair and onto the floor besides Clarke, wrapping the blonde in a hug so tight it knocked the breath out of both of them.

Before either of them knew it, they were sobbing uncontrollably, faces pressed against hair and into necks as their bodies trembled with fatigue and desperation. In that moment, nothing else mattered: it was just two friends, reunited after walking across the coals of hell on bare feet, relishing in the combined racing of belabored heartbeats.

Nothing else mattered.

"Don't I get a hug, too?" A gravelly voice spoke up from the corner.

Clarke looked up immediately, turning with her arms still wrapped around the mechanic to take in the sight of a gaunt-looking Bellamy sprawled on the floor and resting against the wall adjacent to them. He was covered in sweat, looking just as on the verge of death as his female counterparts. His pale lips lifted into a weak smile, eyes tinged in sadness as he took in the sight of his friends looking so weak.
"We don't have time for this, guys," Maya spoke up suddenly, coming up to stand beside Thomas who'd been watching the exchange with furrowed brows. "I'd say we have another five minutes before they come looking, and Thomas only has so many bullets..."

Raven seemed to have a much better understanding of what was happening than Clarke did, as she nodded and gestured for Thomas to help hoist her back into the chair. Clarke looked up at Maya with narrowed eyes as the curly-haired girl quite literally wrung her hands.

"What the hell is going on, Maya?" Clarke finally asked, looking from Maya to Bellamy as Thomas stood behind Raven now furiously tapping away at some kind of keyboard. Maya was the picture of anxiety as she pursed her lips, her eyes darting from the blonde's face to the plethora of screens before her.

"My father started a riot," she answered quietly, voice trembling, not looking at Clarke as she did so. "He waited until everyone was gathered for dinner and then he - "

She swallowed, seemingly struggling against a lump in her throat as she finally met Clarke's eyes, on the verge of tears now. She shook her head, as if willing the blonde not to ask her to continue. Clarke couldn't do that.

"What did he do, Maya?"

The girl closed her eyes, a single tear running down her cheek as she clenched her jaw. Her hands were closed in fists by her side.

"He stole a few weapons from the armory last night, and now he's holding Cage at gun point... I don't know what's happened since my dad pulled the gun on him but, even if some people come forward and support him, he - "

She choked again, a sob ripping from her chest this time. Thomas turned away from an intensely-focused Raven to place a consoling hand on the girl's shoulder. Clarke's weakened heart thudded painfully for the girl.

"He's probably not going to make it through this."

Clarke sighed, her head drooping pathetically as she watched Bellamy's do much the same in her periphery. Tears were prickling at the edges of her vision, and she felt nearly light-headed with the intensity of her sadness for the other girl. She knew the feeling all too well.

"I got it!" Raven suddenly exclaimed, breaking through the heaviness in the room with a burst of energy. She whipped around to look at Maya and Thomas, both seemingly stunned all of a sudden. Clarke was just confused.
"Got what, Raven? What is going on?!"

"The code to activate the fail-safe, Clarke!! I broke through the firewall and got it!!" Clarke paled immediately. If what Raven was saying was true...

"Wait a minute," Clarke nearly whispered, deathly quiet as she matched Maya and Thomas's guarded gazes. "Are you telling me... Your father started the riot as a distraction so that we could escape and kill you all in the process?! How do we even know whether or not we'll have an escape route?!!"

Thomas stepped forward, expression surprisingly collected as he looked down at the blonde.

"I've found a safe passageway for you and your friends to go through - a door in the side of the mountain, accessible from where we are," he told her firmly, eyes softening slightly as he gazed upon Clarke's delicate frame. "The gas will deploy onto every level and into every room in Mt. Weather - except for this one. That's how it works... Once everyone is out cold, Maya and I will get you and your friends to the escape route and lead you out of here."

Clarke mind was working at 100 miles an hour, flipping through every possible scenario that could've led to this one before suddenly coming to a screeching halt.

"What about the radiation? You've both got the marrow treatments?" Clarke asked incredulously, not seeing how it was possible. Maya and Thomas shared a weighted look before nodding.

"Certain members of the guard and everyone under the age of 18 received the first round of treatments from you and your friends," Thomas explained, albeit somewhat awkwardly. "That's both the strongest sector of the population, as well as the smallest - around 30, mostly kids with a couple guards mixed in. There was only enough treatment for a few of us on the force, and they gave it to those they viewed as most 'valuable,' so to speak..."

Not for the first time since she'd been in captivity, Clarke began to feel as if she were drowning - in questions, in misery, everything... How had the marrow from three people been enough to treat 30?! Were they manipulating the dosages somehow? How had they - ?

"The gas is ready to be deployed," Raven spoke up suddenly, cutting off Clarke's train of thought with the brutal reality of what they were about to do.

*They couldn't just -*

"Do it," Bellamy spoke up from the corner, voice flat and hard as his gaze steeled in deadly focus.
"God help us," Maya whispered, moving to grip onto the back of Raven's chair.

Before Clarke could even hope to gather her thoughts in some sort of protest, Raven did just that: she hit a key on the control panel and a siren began to go off, red lights flashing as sounds of mechanized whirring overtook the air around them. The door behind them made a series of clanking and clicking sounds as metal panels moved out to close every open space around the frame.

Clarke's head whipped around to the screens in pure and utter dread. A few guards had made to move in the direction of the control room at the first sounds of the siren, but they were too late... She watched as Raven switched the main monitor to a view of the dining hall, lungs nearly caving in on themselves as she watched a large group of indiscernible figures suddenly succumb to coughs, gagging, and strangled screams, falling to the ground as the invisible gas overtook them - not nearly as peaceful as she'd imagined. Within what felt like seconds, not a single person moved on any screen in the entire underground fortress.

Clarke was at a loss for words. Everything was happening far too quickly for her weakened mind to keep up with...

Moments later, the door behind them reverted back to its original state, clicking open as if signaling them that the gas was no longer lingering in the air. Thomas immediately moved to Bellamy's side, hoisting the limp boy up and supporting him beneath a shoulder with a grunt of difficulty. He moved towards the door, nearly dragging Bellamy along as he met Maya's gaze with a steeled look in his eyes.

"I'll get him to the door first, then I'll come back and carry whoever's left. We've got five minutes before this place blows to high hell, so I'm gonna need you to work fast, alright? We've gotta make it clear of the blast radius." Maya nodded immediately, moving quickly to the blonde's side.

Clarke waved her off in a daze, gesturing for her to help Raven first. She barely heard the mechanic's protests as she became lost in thought.

This was really happening. They were really doing this. They were going to leave all these people - most of whom were innocent, if only by default - to perish in an explosion. Hundreds of people...

In the back of her mind, she registered Maya saying something to her as she struggled to support Raven's weight at the door - most likely telling her she'd return as quickly as possible -, the mechanic doing her best to assist as they stumbled into the hallway and out of sight.

Not even a moment after they'd left, a thought hit Clarke so hard that she had to gasp for breath as it registered.

*The children...*

*It'll just have to be them, then. No one else...*

They were going to kill a bunch of *kids* - innocents who'd simply had the misfortune of being born to the wrong people in the wrong time. Innocents who'd never even stood a chance against their
murderous plan - who were going to be silenced before they even got the chance to speak their voice in the world.

No... This can't happen. I can't let this happen...

It was then, amidst the haze of fatigue and desperate anguish, that Clarke realized what she had to do.

I have to break my promise for good...

I must go where you cannot follow.

Motivated by a burst of strength that had alluded her up to this point, Clarke made to crawl towards the door on all fours, her lungs heaving and her limbs aching through and through. By the time she made it through the threshold, blackness was threatening to overtake her and she knew she couldn't get any further without resting for a moment. She moved to sit up against the wall outside the door, breathing belabored as her vision grew increasingly blurry.

Though she hadn't looked at the clock, she knew at least a minute and a half had gone by - maybe more - and everything she'd ever known seemed to be running out around her - every good thing, at least. Her vision was going hazy, the line between what was real and what wasn't blurring in every conceivable way - driving her towards her mission, her last breath.

A broken promise...

Out of nowhere, Thomas came sprinting into her periphery, sweat dripping off of his frame as he came to a stop in front of her. As he was bending down, Clarke held up her hands, shaking her head with something like resignation settling over her features.

"No," she stated firmly, fixing him with a look as hard as stone as he appeared taken aback. "Not me... The kids, Thomas. Get the kids, and get the hell out of here, alright?"

Thomas looked incredulous, nearly appearing to flounder under the intensity of the blonde's gaze.

"Clarke, no - "

"Don't, Thomas," she cut him off, sounding almost maternal in her admonishment of him. "Don't waste your breath... You've got time to get at least some of them if you go now. .. They need you."

Thomas was furiously shaking his head, eyes filling with tears all of a sudden as he saw the decision made right for him before his eyes, though in denial as he was.

"I can't just leave you here, Clarke, I - "
"Yes, you can. You can, and you will," she told him calmly, smiling softly as she watched brutal acceptance begin to dawn on his features - accepting a lost battle. "You know it's what's right... Just...don't worry about me, okay? I haven't had a good night's sleep in quite some time, anyways..."

Thomas's breath hitched, bending down to place a hand on Clarke's shoulder as he looked at her with swimming eyes. She simply smiled, waiting.

As if everything suddenly clicked into place, he stood, almost mechanically beginning to back down the hallway, his eyes never leaving her face - as if waiting for her to change her mind...

"Hey, Thomas," she called to him weakly, causing him to stop dead in his tracks, a semblance of hope flashing in his eyes. "Tell them I love them, alright? More than anything..."

He closed his eyes, fighting against every instinct he had not to run back to the blonde, instead nodding once in acquiescence - an acceptance of a final mission of utmost importance. Then, as if on the breath of the wind, he was gone, his hasty footsteps slowly fading out into nothing.

She was alone.

And she was going to die.

Resting her head against the wall she was propped against, she did something she hadn't done in a long time:

She laughed. A full-blown, wheezing, almost bombastic type of laugh - one that would've normally warmed the hearts of everyone in her proximity graced with the pleasure of hearing it. She laughed as if she were a child again, as if she'd never known strife - never known any kind of suffering at all, really. She laughed, and she could see her dad smiling down at her, her mother at his side as if she'd never even dreamed of betraying him.

She laughed, and time slowed... She laughed, felt her lungs struggling to keep up with her, her senses lagging behind where she needed them to be. She laughed, and she was ready - ready for the unknown, ready for oblivion, ready for -

Footsteps. Running footsteps.

No, that couldn't be right. Thomas had agreed -

The laughter immediately dying in her throat, Clarke opened her eyes and turned her head to the side, utter confusion gracing her worn features.

This time, everything stopped - time, her heart, and every other fiber of her being for that matter...

Was that - ?
Lexa?

No... It can't be...

The Commander was running down the hallway towards her, adorned in full uniform, her outline strangely blurred, face indistinct.

Clarke blinked in shock, her heartbeat nearly nonexistent, and suddenly the brunette was there, crouching before her, grasping the blonde's face in her hands as she met unfocused blue eyes with fiery greens burning through black warpaint.

"We've got to go now, Clarke," she spoke urgently, grip tightening on the blonde's face - though somehow still soft as a feather. "We don't have much time."

Clarke just stared. Her heart was beating wildly in her chest, her lungs heaving as she looked upon her love. She couldn't be here - how could she possibly be here?

She blinked, and Lexa disappeared. Clarke cried out, reaching blindly...

No, no, no, I didn't mean it... Come back, please don't leave me. I need you, I -

She blinked again and Lexa was back, in the same position as before, crouching in front of her looking almost desperate now.

"Please, Clarke," she begged quietly, voice echoing as if through a metal tin. "I need you to stand up now." Her hands ghosted over the blonde, feeling like a thick cloud of fog lingering over every inch of her skin, not quite touching... It was like Clarke couldn't quite see her in full detail, as if Lexa was slightly detached from her reality and the blonde was barely hanging on by a thread.

All wrong...

"You're not real, are you?" Clarke whispered, fighting the urge to whimper as Lexa blurred and flickered with every blink, time still frozen around them.

Lexa's eyes, pooling with an anguish only captured in Clarke's worst imaginings, grew infinitesimally more tragic, the brunette shaking her head a little. When Clarke blinked again, though, the Commander's facade was back in place, her hands ghosting over the blonde's shoulders now, jaw locked.

"I need you to stand up, Clarke," she repeated urgently, blurring in and out of focus.

What strange trick was her mind playing on her now? Why?

She's not real... You're hallucinating, and you need to snap out of it...

But... You should listen to her...
Steeling herself against whatever loosened part of her mind was playing tricks on her, Clarke braced herself against the wall and slowly stood up, head swimming dangerously as she swayed on her feet. Lexa kept disappearing and coming back again, standing a foot from the blonde as if just barely out of reach now, and Clarke couldn't bear it.

Letting out a scream of frustration, Clarke began to move towards the girl, reaching out desperately, needing ... A strange tether suddenly snapped back into place, time restarted around her and Lexa was right there, closer now and just in front of her, eyes wide and encouraging as Clarke stumbled down the hallway with her arms bracing the wall.

If she could just get to her, just touch her...

"You know where to go, Clarke. You can do this."

In the back of her mind, Clarke registered the surge of adrenaline that was now driving her to move forward, strangely correlated with the way Lexa's outline ebbed and flowed in front of her, never quite there but always close...

She didn't know how she was even walking to begin with - didn't know how her legs were still carrying her. All she felt was pain, and all she wanted to do was sit down and rest. Maybe if she could just stop for a moment -

Brutally snapping into focus all of a sudden, Lexa locked eyes with Clarke, gesturing for the blonde to look down as she tapped the watch that'd materialized on her wrist.

Is that...? My father's watch?!

"You have one minute, Clarke," Lexa stated, strangely calm as she backed through the empty hallway with Clarke desperately trying to catch up to her. "You must run." With that, the Commander turned on her heels and took off down the long hallway, nearly out of sight, and Clarke couldn't handle it, couldn't watch the girl disappear again...

Crying out against whatever sanity she was succumbing to, Clarke conjured up every last ounce of strength and she did just that: she ran, chasing after whatever vision of Lexa she could get.

Every step shot through her like a bolt of agonizing electricity, her vision swimming painfully as her world seemed to tilt sideways on a strange axis. Vaguely, she recognized that she was heading towards the clinic, feeling as if she was guided by some otherworldly force - by Lexa, who was now running in front of her in a flash of movement, urging her on, guiding her.

She was on the verge of passing out, her vision blurring and her lungs heaving desperately against her ribcage. She was standing in the middle of the clinic now, the scene around her appearing as if it were underwater.

Clarke felt like she was losing her mind - losing her grasp of everything that used to be reality - and
Lexa was right there, watching patiently, waiting.

All wrong...

Clarke approached her slowly, reaching out as if to touch her face, touch anything, and then the girl was gone.

Clarke whimpered, distraught, spinning around in search of the brunette, feeling her lungs begging for oxygen as she nearly hyperventilated in the girl's absence.

"Lexa!" she cried out, weak and disoriented, desperate and lost.

I need you... Please come back. Don't leave me here...

I love you.

"This way, hodnes," Lexa's voice sounded from somewhere off to her left, more distant than ever now. "We don't have much time."

Clarke turned, immediately bolting in the direction of the voice, uncaring of her body's last-ditch protests now. Blackness danced around her vision and she barely registered her surroundings, weaving in and out as a familiar blue light bathed her in coldness and foreboding.

She needed to get closer...

Without warning, her knees gave out, her body collapsing in a helpless pile a couple of feet from where Lexa stood near the far wall. She could only see the girl's dark boots now, and she longed to get closer, to touch...

Clarke began to drag her body across the floor towards Lexa, purely motivated by her desire to get one last look at her love before the seconds ticked out.

She was almost there, she just had to reach the button...

Wait, what? The emergency hatch-release?

"Just a little further, hodnes..."

Moving as if on autopilot, Clarke reached up, punching the button against the wall by a pair of metal doors, crawling forward as they opened, an alarm blaring...

Almost there. She's closer now -

You will go where I cannot follow.
Without warning, Clarke was suddenly falling. Falling through thin air, darkness encompassing her as she fell out of what may have been a large trash chute at some point, another set of doors slamming shut as soon as her body fell through.

She vaguely registered a loud crash and crack of bones as she fell into something hard, metallic. The sound of metal smacking against metal was the only thing she registered, feeling strangely weightless as whatever metal container she landed in toppled over.

Blackness overtook her now.

*Come back, Lexa... I need you to come back...*

A boom louder than anything she'd ever heard, nearly deafening her, the earth trembling and collapsing around her, the sound of rocks smacking against the metallic container that shielded her...

*I didn't mean to break my promise... I'm so sorry, Lexa.*

Blackness. Crushing oblivion. A body too heavy to be free of this life... An uncomfortable weight on her legs.

Time passing, running off the rails.

*Not now, death.*

*I'm so sorry... I love you.*

Voices... Voices? Shouting. Closer...

"Over here!!"

Rocks moving, pain shifting. Brightness, too bright.

A woman's face, so familiar, pulled tight with worry and disbelief.

*Lexa?*

"She's here!!"
No, not Lexa... Not the right voice. Not her favorite voice...

Two faces, staring down at her, a man having joined the woman now. So familiar...

All wrong...

"Be careful lifting her. We don't know what's broken." The man's voice, gravelly, worried, wrong...

Blackness.


A flash of forest, the brightness of the moon peaking through the thick canopy above.

More blackness.

Is this what death was supposed to feel like?

"How much further, Echo? She's dying..."

Echo? But, how? What - ?

A face blurred through barely opened eyes, long hair dusting her cheeks, a tangled beard way past an acceptable length. That voice - so familiar, so unwelcome...

No... It can't be...

It shouldn't be...

Roan?
Sooo, that happened... I purposefully tried to write the ending scenes pretty disorienting, so I hope you guys could follow along well enough. Also, I just felt like it was necessary to add in Lexa the adrenaline rush/apparition, cuz why not, right? I'm hoping to get Ch. 23 out much quicker, but if you're getting antsy, I started another Clexa fic that's essentially a Superman/Lois Lane fic, so maybe check it out if you feel like it!

Pleeeeeease let me know your thoughts on this one!! Things are gonna get a little crazy towards the end...(;
Any a was never one to be afraid of anything.

Not during hand-to-hand combat with one of the many mercenaries intent on assassinating her Heda, not when she led the combined armies of eight clans into a skirmish with Azgeda before the formation of the coalition, and not even when the Maunon had finally managed to capture her.

Right now, though... Now, she was scared - terrified, even.

But not for herself. Never for herself.

She snuck a fleeting glance at the woman beside her, done up head-to-toe in war gear with threatening black paint streaking her cheeks, and she positively quaked for her...
The moment that Anya had come barreling into the throne room to regale her journey from the claws of the Maunon, she'd sworn that Lexa had nearly fallen to her knees. Never in her life had she seen a soul caught in such a bind - as haunted as the most damned of creatures destined for an eternity of agony warring with the ragged depths of its core while still as innocent as a child gazing into the eyes of its mother after having spent so long in the dark without her...

She'd let out a heart wrenching sob upon seeing the warrior, nearly stumbling away from the window through which she'd been overlooking the capitol in her desperation to wrap Anya in an embrace full of every kind sentiment she'd ever regarded the woman with but had never said. They'd stood there in the throne room, wrapped in each other's embrace for what felt like hours, sobbing into each other's hair and clinging onto one another as if one might cease to exist upon the lack of touch from the other. Neither woman had ever displayed such a depth of emotion to the other before, and it was as cathartic as it was terrifying.

The epitome of weakness.

It was almost as if she'd believed Anya to be a ghost, some sort of poltergeist of promise, dangling the prospect of recovering her lost star from the endless dusting of a cruel universe. She couldn't keep her hands from wandering to the warrior's face, touching ever so softly as if checking to see if her mentor was actually real, actually back with her again. They'd simply stared at each other for a time, basking in the other's presence while still wrapped in an embrace on the floor of the throne room.

As soon as Lexa seemed to process Anya's return, though, she stood, helping the warrior up and walking her over to the throne to let the woman sit and rest after her long journey. After Anya was seated comfortably, Lexa kneeled beside her, taking the warrior's hands in hers with something like desperation swimming in her eyes, more agonized than her friend had ever seen her before.

The Commander had cut to the chase immediately, inquiring softly yet urgently after the tale of what'd happened, where they'd been - though, she'd already been able to guess the missing persons' whereabouts... She sat and listened to Anya describe her journey with unparalleled patience - from the moment the warrior had woken up in a cage to the instant she'd been released back out into the cool night air, wholly in shock at the new-found freedom. Anya had then described her hasty journey back to Polis, leading the group of weakened Grounders through the dense forest at a pace that nearly drained all of their collective strength.

By the grace of some unknown holy being, they'd managed to make it back to the capitol alive with every member of the group in tack after a few days, and Anya had immediately rushed to the tower to seek audience with her Heda.

As soon as she stopped speaking, Anya sensed a shift in Lexa, the girl she'd raised from a child and had trained to the best of her ability - the girl whose emotions were now threatening to break through the steely facade she'd put on the moment Anya had begun her story. She knew her Heda was doing everything in her power not to ask, not to inquire after the girl who had stolen her heart and soul in the blink of her mentor's eyes. For all of her incessant teasing, though, Anya was never one to deny Lexa anything - never one to add any additional weight to her burden if it could be avoided.

So, she told her. Told her of Clarke's insane stroke of brave genius, of the blonde's willingness to put herself on the chopping block for the rest of them, of the deal she'd made that had freed every last one of their people from the Maunon for the first time in nearly a century. The deal that would more than likely cost the girl her life...

Lexa hung on Anya's every word, searching the warrior's face for any indicator of hope, anything
she could cling to, anything at all. Anya watched as the flame behind her eyes began to dim, watched as the brunette's head slowly began to droop beneath the weight of hopelessness and the fear of loss, and her heart ached for the girl.

It was in that moment, in seeing Lexa visibly deflate before her eyes with the knowledge of Clarke's potential demise, that Anya knew. She knew then that Clarke hadn't stolen Lexa's heart - she hadn't had to. Lexa had given it freely, willingly, and desperately, longing to solidify her place by the side of the princess who'd fallen from the stars, the girl who'd captivated her from the moment Lexa had lain eyes on her. Anya knew now...

The next moment, though, Lexa was up, towering over Anya with her hands clenched into fists by her side, eyes hardened by iron gates having closed over the windows to her soul - though the warrior had to actively ignore the unhidden tear tracks left on the brunette's cheeks that clawed at her heartstrings so. Gone was Lexa - the softer, gentler, quietly observant soul who wore her heart on her sleeve for those she believed would never leave her. Stood before her now was Heda, - the merciless, unyielding force of nature at the feet of whom armies of men fell and trembled with a mixture awestruck reverence and fear. Now every bit the leader she was expected to be, Heda recounted what'd happened since Anya and the Sky People had been kidnapped, tone cold, carefully aloof...

When the foursome had failed to return by sundown, the Commander had sent out search parties - one of which she'd led - to find them. As soon as the search parties returned empty-handed, Lexa had immediately deduced what'd happened, suddenly immersed in an inner battle that weighed her personal allegiances against her obligations as Commander, and it had shaken her to the core: to save them or to allow another four souls to fall at the hands of the Maunon... Titus and a few of the clan elders who served as advisors in Polis for matters of such important were adamant that Lexa let the missing four perish, citing their armies' lack of preparedness against the Maunon as the main reason for letting them go. Indra and Gustus, on the other hand, had argued passionately in opposition, claiming that Anya was too knowledgeable, too important, to be left in the claws of their greatest enemy without at least an attempt being made to save her. The two warriors had even brought in Octavia and Wells to testify on the Sky Peoples' behalf, intensifying the issue tenfold when the younger Blake had lost control of herself in the throne room, a still-injured Wells having to hold Octavia back as the girl had quite literally snarled at Titus.

Even from Lexa's recounting alone, Anya could tell that the decision had put the younger girl through the ringer, forced to reconcile two parts of herself that could never quite seem to exist in the same sphere - fighting against her heart tearing itself to shreds while her mind remained a steel trap caught between logic and obligation. Ultimately, though, the Commander's decision had been made the moment that Titus had reminded her that Anya, herself, would tell her Heda to hold back the army and let the four of them go - a sentiment which the warrior immediately agreed with, much to Lexa's visible relief...

If Anya knew anything about her former second, though, it was that Lexa's decision had probably haunted her perhaps even more than refusing to avenge Costia's death had done, the burden of ghosts unseen and unheard to anyone but the Commander visible in the circles around the girl's eyes, the sickly pallor of her skin.

Lexa had made the decision - called every search party back and dispersed the gathering army awaiting their orders - and had all but parked herself on the balcony of the tower after that - watching, waiting, agonizing... She'd apparently only missed the group of freed prisoners re-entering the city on account of her pacing throughout the throne room - a habit which she'd begun alternating
between staring into nothingness and fighting off every urge within her that told her to just go, save her loved ones while she still had the chance...

Barely a moment of silence had passed between the two women before Lexa began speaking again, this time slightly re-energized by the plan she'd been constructing since the instant she'd agreed not to unite a force against the Maunon to bring back her former mentor - and the lover who she seemed to adore with every fiber of her being, if Anya's observations had anything to show for it...

She informed Anya that the two of them would awaken at first light to begin planning their journey back to the Maunon, that the warrior was not to tell a soul of their plans, regardless of protocol.

Much to both women's dismay, though, they'd been forced to halt their journey entirely the moment that Prince Roan of Azgeda had gone suspiciously missing upon the freed prisoners' return to Polis, but that'd become another issue entirely - one that Lexa was intent on back-logging until they could complete their current mission...

The two women would be stealth, and they would be alone, regardless of how much that decreased their chances of success. It was the only way that Lexa could reconcile her duty to protect her people and the desire to recover her heart - though still slightly more risky than Anya would've liked. The warrior understood, though, and she supposed it was better than the Commander leading an entire army against a force they couldn't even dream to defeat on their own - a form of mass suicide, really. Or, worse, facing the Maunon alone...

Regardless of the fact that no plan they formulated would ever be enough to save anyone, Anya kept quiet, conceded to let Lexa try, let her former second finally give herself over to her desire to put Lexa first for once in her life - if only for the sake of attempting to rescue the girl who'd saved all of their people...

The next morning, Heda had ordered Gustus to stay behind and rule in her stead, instructing him not to inform Titus of their departure until he believed them to be miles outside of the city. Though the man had protested adamantly, Heda had refused to back down, and he was forced to submit to her will - albeit grudgingly and with great unease.

As soon as the moon had reached its full height in the sky, the two women were off, armed to the teeth and cloaked in the cover of night, quiet forces to be reckoned with, embarking on an ill-fated rescue mission that threatened to undo both of them at the very seams...

So, here they trekked, as silent as they were deadly, drowning in the foreboding of the great mountain that now loomed over them not too far ahead...

Though Anya would never admit it out loud - would never humble herself in such a way before her Heda -, she wasn't just scared for Lexa... Flashes of dark hair and infuriatingly cocky grins seemed to haunt her now, increasing their persistence with every step they drew closer to the mountain. Anya had to find her, had to save her somehow. She had to...

That girl... She stirred something in Anya that the warrior hadn't even believed existed within herself in the first place, and it terrified her. It terrified her that someone else - someone who she'd never willingly given herself over to, had been powerless to fight against when all was said and done - now
held something over her, had entranced her in such a way. A warrior was never supposed to succumb to such temptation, was never supposed to find solace in the presence of those they'd sworn to protect. And, yet...

Any true believed that she'd follow that damned girl anywhere, would do anything she desired should she only ask. The warrior was beginning to understand why so many men had started wars over such a feeling, had been willing to die for the euphoria it brought them...

The fact that she now had a concept of the feeling - felt as if she could begin to understand the insanity behind it all - only made her fear for Lexa worsen. Surely, the girl wouldn't survive the loss of such bliss, the home that she'd found in the most unlikely of places...

Ripping Anya out of her troubling revery, the quiet air around them was suddenly pierced by brutal screams, the heightened pitch of a female in grave distress some ways away from them. Screams that sounded awfully like -

_No, it couldn't be... Raven?_

_My Raven?_

Without even sparing a glance at Lexa, Anya was off, sprinting towards the voice as if it were her only given mission left in life. The Commander was at her heels immediately, matching her pace in stride as they barreled through the trees toward the sound.

_Please don't be hurt... Please don't let them be hurting you..._

She and Lexa broke through the tree line, slowing down as they took in the scene before them with widening eyes.

Barely one hundred yards in front of them up a slight hill was Raven, wrestling against a curly-haired girl in the grass while Bellamy sat a few feet from them, looking pale and stunned for some reason... Upon closer observation, it appeared that the girl was holding Raven down, keeping her from crawling towards a tall boy about their age in the garb of the Maunon, the boy midway through the process of gently placing what appeared to be a small child onto the grass beside Bellamy - joining the ranks of a few other tiny and unconscious figures on either side of the Sky Boy.

A metal door stood wide open roughly another hundred yards behind them, a flashing red light the only guidance into what appeared to be a long and dark corridor leading to the underground.

As soon as Anya processed the scene, she couldn't help the immediate warming of her heart that overtook every sensory neuron in her body at the sight of the struggling mechanic. Regardless of her distress for whatever reason, the girl was _alive_. She was alive, and Anya could protect her now...

The smile that had been forming on her lips instantly fell away when she turned to glance at Lexa by her side, watching as her Heda's eyes darted frantically about the scene, her brows furrowed and her hands clenched into white-knuckled fists at her side. She was trembling profusely, and Anya immediately knew why.

Clarke was nowhere to be found, and the warrior's heart plummeted in dread as she tried to
comprehend what that might mean... Still unable to make out Raven's screams of protest, she watched as Lexa took a couple of hasty steps forward, worry and apprehension radiating off of her frame in waves. Anya followed at her heels immediately, clenching and unclenching her jaw as she attempted to remain calm for her friend.

The two women didn't make it five steps before they felt what could only be described as the wrath of some higher power striking into the earth with an iron fist, reverberating beneath their feet with a series of deafening booms that thundered through the night like the steps of giants. On the loudest and most destructive of booms, the ground beneath her feet buckled slightly before suddenly bursting back up again, throwing the warrior backwards through the air and into a tree.

Anya barely registered the screams and the bright flash of explosive flames through the metal door as she went hurtling backward, her entire frame smacking against the solid tree trunk with a resounding crack.

Everything went black for a moment...

When Anya came to, facedown in the grass, her vision swimming and her head throbbing, everything was in flames. The grass in front of her, the trees around the perimeter, nearly the very air, itself...

The warrior was stunned, turning her head sideways in search of Lexa who'd been standing beside her when the explosion had gone off. Much to her astonishment, the Commander was already rising to her feet, wobbling a little at her full height with blood dripping down from a gash in her hairline to mix with her warpaint. As if sensing Anya's eyes on her, Lexa immediately whipped around, concern lighting her gaze as she knelt beside her mentor, placing a gentle hand on the woman's back.

"Are you alright? Can you stand?" the brunette inquired urgently, eyes appearing to scan the warrior's frame for any sign of serious injury.

Anya grunted, hoisting herself up onto all fours with Lexa's immediate help, groaning as the girl helped guide her to her feet. She shared a weighted glance with her Heda as they looked each other over, allowing themselves to relish in the other's apparent survival in the wake of the mass destruction.

"I'll live," Anya answered flatly, gulping against the lump now forming in her throat as she met Lexa's worried gaze. "But we must move now... We have to find them."

Lexa nodded, allowing Heda to take over once more as she and Anya ran head-on into the flames.

The moment she and the Commander made it onto the other side of the ring of fire, smoke assaulted Anya's vision and she found herself having to scramble to pull her cloak over her nose and mouth to keep from breathing the toxic air in. Flames licked up to nearly waist-high now, and Anya glanced over at Lexa to watch the woman disappearing behind what looked like a wall of fire, apparently having seen something.
The warrior willed herself not to follow, instead focusing on the bodies sprawled a few yards in front of her, unmoving. With her pulse racing and her stomach churning, Anya sprinted forward and stopped in her tracks at what she saw.

The boy in the uniform of the Maunon was hunched over in the grass, clothes torn and the skin of his back completely charred off by the flames where he'd apparently used his body as a shield against the explosion. Moving closer, Anya's heart nearly stopped when she saw what he'd been protecting: the small and unconscious forms of three children were gathered beneath him, wholly untouched by the destruction where his back had taken the brunt of the damage.

A few feet to the left of him, Bellamy lay in much the same position, apparently having rolled over to protect the small bodies beside him - slightly less bloodied and burned than the other boy.

Anya ran up to Bellamy, grasping him beneath the arm pits and unceremoniously pulling him off the kids and dragging him away from the flames that continued to encroach upon them. Once she was sure that he'd be safe from the destructive radius, she ran back into the fire, gathering the two small children that'd been beneath him into her arms in one fell swoop and whisking them out of the danger zone.

She repeated the process with the boy from the Maunon and the children he'd protected - albeit slightly more hesitantly -, and, before long, she found herself keeled over and gasping for fresh air a healthy distance from where the fire continued to burn through the darkness, cloaked by the cover of forest.

Before Anya even had time to work up any worry for her Heda - or Raven, for that matter -, she suddenly heard the sound of her name being called, of shouts inquiring her whereabouts. She yelled back, coughing through the smoke coating her throat, and barely had to wait any time at all before Lexa suddenly came barreling out of nowhere, a limp body slung over each shoulder in some feat of adrenaline-powered strength. Upon seeing her warrior safe and relatively unharmed, Lexa visibly deflated with relief, coming up to stand a few feet from Anya as she placed the two girls in her grasp onto the forest floor with impossible gentleness.

After a moment of tense silence as they looked over the unconscious bodies - the crackling of roaring flames the only sound for miles -, Anya looked up and watched as Lexa devolved before her eyes into a being of pure anxiety and unadulterated dread, the girl stumbling back a couple of steps with a look on her face as if she'd been struck by a steel fist.

Her heart plummeted even further into abysmal depths as she watched her former second begin to hyperventilate, chest heaving and eyes brimming with tears as she backed into the nearest tree, clawing at the bark beneath her fingers and blindly searching the forest before her for something, anything ...

Anya physically felt her heart break in that moment.

"Leksa," she cooed softly, approaching the distraught girl as one might approach a trapped bear, an angry lion - a creature on the verge of losing its only tether to reality. "Leksa, look at me..."

She cupped the brunette's face gently in both of her hands, leaning her torso into the other girl's in the
hopes of providing some form of comfort. When Lexa's eyes refused to focus on her, still wildly scanning the forest around them for a flash of blonde hair, a spark of blue, Anya tightened her grip, stroking her thumbs across both cheeks and imploring the girl to come back to her.

"Leksa, please... Look at me," Anya begged, nearly whispering now as she felt tears welling up in her eyes. "Look at me, child... I'm here... I'm here, Leksa... Beja."

As if commanded by the plea, Lexa's eyes suddenly locked onto Anya's, tears welling up over cracked windows to a soul threatening to shatter at any moment now - in more anguish than Anya had ever believed would be possible to feel in a single lifetime. The girl's lower lip was trembling, gasping breaths stuttering around dry sobs that heaved from her chest, and she shook her head almost furiously in Anya's grasp, unseeing.

"S-she's not h-here, Onya... She's not here," Lexa rasped weakly, tragically, looking and sounding every bit the child that Anya had once found staring at the corpses of her slain parents, utterly broken. "She's not here, and I can't - I just... Where is she, Anya? Where is she?! I can't do this, I can't - "

"Shh, Leksa... Beja, goufa," Anya pleaded, cutting the girl's ramblings off before she could succumb to a spiral that would surely break the warrior's heart for good, gripping the girl's face infinitesimally harder. "You cannot allow yourself to think such things... We have no way of knowing whether she - " Anya gulped, afraid of finishing that sentence as she closed her eyes, leaning forward to rest her forehead against Lexa's.

The girl in her grasp was trembling violently now, her hands having come up to grip onto the tops of Anya's shoulders as if they were the only things keeping her grounded, chest continuing to heave against the warrior's.

"We must not jump to conclusions, Leksa... They will only drive us closer to madness, and I will not - "

"She's not here, Anya!!" Lexa cut her off in a tragically agonized whisper, nearly whimpering with every labored breath she took now. "I-I was supposed to protect her, and she's not here... She promised me she would stay... Anya, I - "

"I know, goufa, I know," Anya coaxed, moving to stroke the girl's hair with trembling fingers.

She began to whisper soft and calming phrases in Trigesdasleng, desperate to provide some kind of distraction for the girl threatening to break before her eyes - the girl who was never supposed to show anything beyond lofty indifference...
"I c-can't do this... I don't think I can do this," Lexa whimpered, gripping onto Anya's shoulder so hard that the warrior was afraid she might draw blood, sounding strangled. "Not again, not her ... I can't - I can't lose her ... I... I love her, Anya... So much ..."

The confession was nothing more than a whisper, nothing but a shaky breath loosed to mingle with the wind, but it was everything - every answer to any lingering doubt in Anya's mind.

*This will surely kill her...*

Before Anya could even hope to figure out a response to that, the sound of coughing somewhere behind them suddenly snapped the women back to reality, out of the intimate moment as rare as it was heart-wrenching... The two women immediately looked around for the source, nearly stumbling over to kneel beside a waking Raven, the mechanic coughing and groaning through her lingering unconsciousness.

Despite herself, Anya's heart sung at the sight, overwhelmingly relieved - and something else...

She knelt on Raven's right with Lexa directly opposite her, the Commander having miraculously managed to conceal her emotions beneath a shaky facade - one that appeared on the verge of crumbling to pieces any second now...

As Raven continued to cough, Anya moved to cradle the girl's head in her lap, elevating it slightly in the hopes of clearing the girl's airways somehow. Lexa simply watched, frozen beneath the wrath of a swarm of dangerous emotions threatening to take her down now. Gulping a little bit, Anya began to stroke Raven's hair, whispering encouraging phrases to the girl in the hopes of rousing her out of the in-between.

Without warning, the mechanic's eyes suddenly snapped open, the girl heaving labored breaths and squirming in Anya's grasp as if unable to process that she was in the arms of someone on her side, someone safe...

"It's okay, *skai gada*, it's me," Anya whispered calmly, brushing her fingertips across the girl's forehead. "I will not hurt you."

The warrior glanced up to meet Lexa's curious gaze, the girl's eyes lighting with a kind of understanding as she watched her former mentor dote after the other girl. Anya nearly blushed beneath it.

"*Anya?*" Raven rasped, voice crackling over dryness and fatigue, disbelieving as she stared up into Anya's face.

The mechanic looked down, registering the Commander kneeling beside her, and she visibly relaxed into Anya's lap, breathing deeply through lingering distress. Anya let her do it, patiently waiting for the girl to recover, all the while keeping her *Heda*'s increasingly agitated frame at the top of her vision.

Not two moments later, though, Lexa was leaning forward, taking one of Raven's hands in both of hers, looking as if she were waiting at the sick bed of a dying loved one taking their last breath. Anya almost held her breath...
"I'm glad you're safe, Raven," Lexa told her softly, tone genuine though noticeably trembling beyond belief - sounding very much on the verge of a grave precipice. "But, please, I - " Lexa gulped, struggling around a lump in her throat as she fought a visible battle beneath the mechanic's questioning gaze.

"I must know...," Lexa continued finally, voice barely a whisper, sounding smaller than Anya had ever heard her before. "W-where is Clarke? Is she...is she safe? Is she alright?"

What happened next was enough to knock all of the breath from Anya's lungs.

The moment that Lexa's questions registered with Raven, the mechanic shot up into a sitting position, nearly bumping heads with Anya as she frantically glanced around, noting with relief the bodies of her companions - though gasping at the sight of Bellamy's back. As soon as Raven's eyes locked onto the roaring flames consuming the hillside beyond the tree line, though, a guttural sob ripped from her throat, her hand clapping over her mouth in the attempt to stifle the inhuman noises now tearing out of her.

Anya shot a panicked glance in Lexa's direction, dread washing over her at the sight of her Heda sitting back on her heels, growing sickly pale beneath the intermingled blood and war paint on her face, seemingly frozen as her eyes glossed over while her hands gripped onto the cloth covering her thighs so tightly that the warrior was afraid the girl's knuckle bones might snap. The air around them seemed to shift, preparing accordingly for the moment that was sure to shape the rest of their lives for good...

Raven was hunched forward now, sobs wracking her body as she clawed at the grass, and Anya couldn't take it anymore. She moved forward, wrapping her arms around the mechanic's waist and pulling the girl against her frame, moving to cradle Raven's head against her chest as the dark-haired girl clawed at Anya now, needing something, anything, that could bring her comfort. Anya glanced over at Lexa again, the brunette still frozen in place, staring off into nothingness, the only indication that she was actually still living the erratic and pained heaving of her chest...

"She's gone," Raven whimpered, snapping Anya's attention back to her as she worked around hyperventilating sobs of agony. "S-she...she told Thomas to - "

She choked, succumbing to a fit of coughs as Anya rubbed her back, helping the girl through it to the best of her ability.

"She t-told Thomas to l-leave her and...get the kids," Raven continued, voice quivering almost as much as her torso in Anya's arms now, broken. "She t-told him to g-get the kids, and she stayed... She s-stayed behind and now - "

The mechanic buried her head against Anya's chest, overcome by sobs as she shook in the warrior's grasp. Anya wouldn't allow herself to look over at Lexa now... She couldn't.

"She's gone... Clarke's gone ," Raven cried, nearly strangled with grief now, falling to pieces against Anya. " She's gone!!"
It snapped. That tether - the delicate string holding their small pieces of reality together - was now broken. With two small words, everything they knew to be true flipped onto its head, and Anya was breathless, gasping, terrified...

Knowing she had to do it, knowing she would most likely never recover from the sight, Anya knew she had to look at Lexa, had to see the girl she'd raised from a child.

To her utter shock and rousing dismay, Lexa was up, having risen to her feet with Raven's words, her expression blank and empty, eyes unseeing, unfeeling, eerily resembling something like a lifeless shell in the place of the person who'd been there only moments before.

Before the warrior could say anything, do anything, Lexa had turned on her heels, breaking into a run and disappearing further into the darkness of the forest like a ghost on the breath of the wind.

"LEXA!!" Anya cried desperately, making to follow but being weighed down by the sobbing girl in her grasp.

She was torn, caught between the desire to comfort Raven and the need to chase after her Heda, keep her from harm - save her from herself...

In the back of her mind, though, she knew that she needed to give Lexa space, needed to allow her a moment of reprieve away from prying eyes that always seemed to deconstruct her so - even if it went against every single one of her instincts to do so...

Fighting through every screaming fiber in her being, Anya did just that - she let Lexa go. There didn't seem to be anything else she could do at this point...

So, she held Raven a little tighter, rocking the two of them where they sat together on the forest floor, unable to stop the tears that streamed freely down her face where she pressed it against dark hair. For the first time in her life, the warrior was lost, feeling weaker and in more despair than she'd ever thought possible.

They fell into a mournful quiet, wrapped in each other's embrace, one whimpering beneath her breath while the other trembled, doing everything in her power to hold them both together...

The next moment, though, Anya felt as if her heart was literally being ripped from her chest at the sound that tore through the still night air, encompassed in pure tragedy, life-altering loss...

A scream, somewhere far off in the forest, laced with more anguish and unimaginable agony than should've been possible for one human to bear, ripped from the very core of a being now shattered, a life now left in irreparable pieces...

A soul now broken.

Much like the white-hot agony Clarke had experienced when she'd first crash-landed on the ground, only much, much worse...

*Why does it hurt so badly?*

A wet cloth, warm and oddly comforting, swiped across her forehead and down her cheeks, over her shoulders and down her arms. Like the baths her mother used to give her as a child...

*Is it supposed to hurt this badly?*

A soft voice, light and encouraging, calling to her, pleading for her. Simple, calming...

*Not my favorite voice...*

A much rougher voice, gravelly and disquieting, familiar and unwelcome...

*All wrong...*

Blackness. The comfort of a false death, a lack of conscious awareness. Complacency to this state of being.

*I must go where you cannot follow...*

Green, so much green. Soft touches - worshipping, savoring, home.
Laughter so rare, so beautiful...

Stay with me... I'll never let you go.

A different kind of pain, that of a broken promise, a shattered heart...

I love you.

Clarke woke with a start, gasping for breath, disoriented and desperate, hands clawing at the soft bed furs beneath her.

Wait a minute... Bed furs?

"Chil yu daun, skai prisa," a woman's voice told her from somewhere off to her left - that same soft voice that'd colored her dreams.

Clarke's head whipped around towards the sound, actively ignoring the pounding in her skull and the bile that threatened to rise up in her throat at the sudden movement. Her heart nearly stopped the moment her eyes locked onto the source.

"You've been unconscious for many days, Clarke," Echo told her, wringing out a cloth over the bowl of water positioned in her lap. The girl sat in a wooden chair beside Clarke's bed, dressed in sleep clothes lined with heavy furs, her hair hanging loosely over her shoulders.

"It is probably best if you stay still... Your body will heal much faster that way."

Unable to stand her swimming vision and the tilting of the world on its axis, Clarke sunk back down into the furs with utmost caution, loosing a groan when even that wasn't enough to ease her misery...

It was only then that she noticed the sharp and throbbing ache in both legs that seemed to resonate throughout her entire body, much more dull than it must've been before - the pain that'd haunted her even in the grips of unconsciousness, still agonizing in its own right. Clarke closed her eyes, breathing deeply in and out, attempting to steady herself against whatever stage of pre-death this was.

"We were worried about you at first," Echo spoke up again, soft voice filling the room around them - the room that Clarke wasn't cognizant enough to absorb yet. "You didn't so much as twitch for the first few days. We simply had to monitor the rise and fall of your chest, the pulse beating in your neck... It was the only way we knew you'd made it through." Echo stood then, moving to situate
herself on the edge of Clarke's bed and leaning forward to swipe the cloth across the blonde's forehead. Clarke closed her eyes, feeling tears prickling behind them now as she was enraptured by a gentleness she believed she'd never encounter again.

The two of them sat in silence for a while after that, Clarke drifting back to the edge of sleep beneath Echo's ministrations. She fought against it, though, determined to figure out where she was and what, for that matter, had happened back at Mt. Weather.

Everything still felt so wrong...

"Wh-what happened?" Clarke rasped, blinking her eyes open to look at the girl as her voice scraped through her throat like sandpaper. She gulped against it, pushing on. "Where are we?"

Echo seemed unmoved by her questions, expression calm and measured as she stopped her movements, placing the cloth and bowl on the bedside table to Clarke's left. She looked back at the blonde, smiling softly at her, eyes gentle.

"You saved us all," Echo stated simply, as if it were her favorite fact to recite. "You saved us, and you brought down the Maunon for good... You are a legend now, skai prisa."

Clarke's head was spinning, attempting to process this information but stuttering over the logistics. It was all so blurry...

"But...it wasn't just me," Clarke told the girl quietly, brows furrowing as she fixed Echo with a look of pure confusion. "I didn't even do anything, really... I wasn't the one who pressed the button to set the explosion off, either. I was just there - "

"You were the one who made the deal that freed our people, were you not?" Echo cut her off, raising a brow in her otherwise calm expression. "It does not matter whether you did or did not press some button... What matters is that you did more for us in the span of days than all of our past and current rulers combined had managed to do in nearly a century... You are a legend, Clarke, and history will remember your name until the end of days comes again... All of the honor goes to you."

Clarke could only stare at the girl. How on earth was she supposed to respond to that?

If becoming a "legend" meant that she had to douse her skin in the blood of hundreds in order to get the title, she wasn't sure she wanted any part of it... She was surprised the ramifications of her actions hadn't hit her harder yet. Perhaps it was simply the fact that her mind was too muddled, her body too weak...

After all, she had helped end an entire civilization, had she not?
"We found you in the ruins of one of the many tunnel systems that ran beneath the Maunon after the explosion went off," Echo continued, drawing Clarke's attention back to her as she appeared suddenly sucked into memories. "We did not know if you had even made it out of there alive in the first place, but we spent hours scouring the perimeter regardless, hoping... It was a stroke of pure luck that we found you when we did. Not a moment more and you would've been dead... Both of your legs were nearly crushed by the rubble, but our healers believe you'll make a full recovery in time."

Clarke had so many questions...

First of all, what was Echo even doing near Mt. Weather in the first place? Why was she so intent on finding Clarke? And who in the hell was this "we"?!

The blonde's blood nearly froze in her veins, heart thudding unevenly when she remembered...

**Roan**.

But, *how*? The last time she'd seen the prince, he'd been in captivity within the dungeons of Polis... How had he escaped? And *why*, for that matter, was he with Echo? What did they want with her? And where in the hell were they?!

Before she could even begin to voice any of her questions, though, the door on the far side of the room was opening, revealing the prince, himself, followed by an older woman with sandy blonde hair now greying somewhat. Both were dressed in flowing robes with fur-lined collars that covered their clothes underneath, hair undone, scars plainly obvious on their cheeks, and faces devoid of paint, just like Echo.

Roan's eyes danced with something like mirth intermingled with relief when he locked onto the blonde's open eyes, a toothy grin breaking out across his face.

"I see our infamous *skai prisa* has finally awakened!" Roan announced boisterously, raising an eyebrow in a disgustingly cocky expression. The woman who'd accompanied him slipped to the back corner of the room, oddly quiet and unassuming in the presence of the prince. Clarke couldn't quite get a good look at her face...

"Welcome back to the world of the living, Clarke... It's truly a pleasure to have you."

The blonde didn't miss the double meaning behind the man's words, and her eyes narrowed suspiciously as her heart pounded to an uncomfortable rhythm in her chest.

"And, might I be the first to say? Welcome to Azgeda."

This time, Clarke was almost positive that her heart actually *did* stop.

*It can't be... I couldn't have been out for that long, could I?*

*This can't be happening...*
"I must say," the prince continued, moving to sit on the side of Clarke's bed opposite Echo while the blonde remained frozen, uncomprehending, terrified. "To finally have my plans come to fruition is more satisfying than I ever could've imagined."

Clarke just laid there, paralyzed, pale and staring into the face of the man who now looked like he'd won the greatest of battles, the most hard-fought of victories. Roan appeared entranced by memories now, a glossy look forming in his cold eyes.

"Ever since I watched your ship fall from the sky in a blaze of fire, I knew I had to get to you, harness your power for myself... I'd been out on a hunt with two of my men when it landed, and it was a result of purely bad timing that you'd already been dragged from the crash site by the time we'd gotten there. Thankfully, though, I was able to bring proof of your arrival back to my kwin, and it has brought us such wonderful fortune ever since then..."

The prince stood, moving to stand over Clarke as he brushed stray strands of hair from her face. She had to choke back bile as her bottom lip trembled, too weak, too stunned to move away - do anything, really...

"Being captured by the Commander before was simply a nuisance to me, a small obstacle to overcome in the quest for a larger purpose, really... And, thanks to you and the glorious distraction you provided, Echo was able to free me from the capitol with little fanfare." Roan smiled fondly at her now, an undercurrent of menace present that had Clarke cringing back into the pillow.

She still couldn't seem to formulate words - or a coherent train of thought, even. All she felt was dread.

This can't be happening...

"Like I said before, I've got big plans for you, skai prisa, but it is no longer my place to explain them...," he stepped away from the bedside, gesturing for the woman in the back corner to come forward. She did, expression neutral and somewhat aloof as she looked the blonde up and down, the deep scars of Azgeda lining her face slightly more prominently than the wrinkles also present there.

"I'd like you to meet my mother, skai prisa - but you may call her Queen Nia."

Just like that, Clarke was free-falling... Falling into an abyss, a part of her mind she didn't know existed - the part that housed her darkest memories, her greatest fears, every demon that sought to drag her to oblivion. A place devoid of light or hope - the place where souls go to wither away in the wake of their impending removal from existence, a place of no return...

Clarke felt as if she was being strangled, blood roaring in her ears as her heart struggled to beat again.

No, no, no, no, no....

The woman, Queen Nia, stepped towards her, a smug smile now spreading across features dripping with malice, eyes dancing with promises of torment...
Clarke snuck a glance at Echo, eyes wide and silently pleading, begging for the warrior to do something, help her... Her heart plummeted impossibly further, aching with betrayal, when the warrior simply turned away, jaw clenched, making as if she was prepared to leave her queen to attend to business in private.

"My son was right about you, child," Nia nearly cooed, voice reminiscent of the hiss of a snake warning its prey, preparing to strike. "You are perfect."

This can't be happening... Why is this happening?

"When he first came to me with stories of a princess who'd fallen from the sky in a storm of fire, I dismissed him, angry that he would bring such folklore into my court." Nia moved to stand directly above Clarke's head, staring down at the blonde as if she'd just cracked an impossible code, uncovered a deadly weapon... Clarke shivered beneath it.

"As time went on, though, your legend grew... Word came to me that the Commander had taken you to the capitol, honored you by granting you the position of healer alongside her own personal henchmen... The clans consumed any and all news of you like moths consuming the light of flames. I was intrigued, to say the least..." Nia moved to brush the back of her hand down Clarke's cheek, and the blonde had to fight off the urge to cry out at the way the touch seemed to sear into her skin like sparks from a fire.

"That is why I sent the virus carrier to Polis; I was testing you, your strength, your power... The Commander - the naive child that she is - was foolish enough to believe that I actually cared enough to go after her... That simply provided me with more motivation to take what I wanted, plan for your arrival accordingly..." Roan was at the back of the room now, watching impassively as his mother assailed Clarke with information, rendering the blonde even more speechless than she was before.

This can't be happening...

"My son being captured, your being taken by the Maunon - all unimportant details," Nia huffed dismissively, as if she couldn't be bothered to spend a single moment more on recounting those details, reliving that annoyance. "All I had to do was wait - wait for my son to return to me, wait for my opportunity to arise... And now, it has." She was smiling down at Clarke now, resembling something like a shark having detected blood in deep waters, the creatures the blonde used to read about as a child - have nightmares about, more like...

"I always get what I want, skai prisa... If not right away, then with time, patience... You'll do well to remember that."

As if suddenly slapped back into cognizance, Clarke cleared her throat, preparing to speak around the lump that'd formed there for the first time in the woman's presence.

"Wh-why?" the blonde rasped, silently cursing herself for the way her voice trembled, revealing the inner turmoil currently overtaking her. "Wh-why me? What could I possibly do for you? I'm no one..."
Nia couldn't possibly know about the nature of her relationship with Lexa, could she? It'd been so new, and they'd been so careful... Did she really just capture Clarke to be able to say that she was the one who'd killed the blonde, then? To torture useless information out of her?

*Why?!*

To the blonde's utter surprise, the queen actually threw back her head and laughed at the questions. She laughed ...

"So naive, so *malleable.*" Nia spoke in between laughter, the sound like scraping metal in the blonde's ears. "You are a legend, Clarke... Even before the fall of the *Maunon,* your presence has been steeped in the most fascinating of mysteries, surrounded by grandeur and tales of something close to divinity... There has not been a figure that has captivated the clans' attention so vividly since the first Commander's lineage was passed down to her successor, since the discovery of the *Natblida...* Your presence, alone, is enough to awe, to inspire."

Clarke gulped, throat working as she met the woman's menacing gaze once more.

"Why kill me, then? Why waste the effort?" The blonde questioned hotly, proud of the amount of disgust she'd managed to work into her tone - sounding almost recklessly fearless this time.

Nia smirked, unmoved by the blonde's hostility towards her.

"Silly girl... I don't want to *kill* you. That would be the epitome of near-sightedness, don't you think?" Nia snorted, shaking her head a little as she continued to stare into the very depths of the blonde's soul.

"No, I want to *remake* you, *skai prisa* ... Train you in *my* image, mold you, make you the most revered and fearsome warrior our people have ever seen... You will stand by my side from this moment on as an extension of my legacy, the defender of my throne - *Seken kom Haiplana.*"

Clarke couldn't move, couldn't think, couldn't process a single word. Ice had taken the place of blood in her veins, the rattling of chains a sad excuse for her heartbeat...

*This can't be happening...*

"You will stand by my side when I lead my army against the Commander and her pathetic band of mongrels, and you bring her head to me on a silver platter the moment I demand it."

*This isn't real... This isn't happening... How could I let this happen?*

*I'm so sorry... So incredibly sorry.*
Nia leaned down, capturing Clarke's chin between two long and claw-like fingers, smiling sinisterly, blood symbolically dripping from her teeth...

The next words out of the queen's mouth splintered the very ground beneath Clarke's feet, swallowing the blonde whole and promising to permanently extinguish her light from the world of the living, crushing every fiber of her being beneath an iron boot...

"You are mine now."

Chapter End Notes

....I realize the cliff-hangers are somewhat of a menace, but I find it must be done more often than not... Like I said before, I'd really love to hear your thoughts on this one, and I'll do my best to respond! Anything left unexplained is purposedful - a lead-in to the next part, if you will...

Now, onto the final chapter!!! (;
The stories of Clarke's memorial were almost as prolific as the legend of the woman, herself.

Set beneath a sky as bleak as the hearts of those who now saw one additional star burning above them, the ceremony had drawn thousands of people to the center of Polis, all guided by their desire to pay tribute to the fallen Mountain-Slayer, the legendary savior of their people.

It was said that Anya had delivered a powerfully moving eulogy to the large crowd, full of emotion many didn't think her capable of expressing - or even possessing, in the first place. Raven and Bellamy stood right behind her the entire time - Bellamy with his torn back still healing, most likely permanently scarred now -, tears streaming unhidden down their faces as they attempted to keep themselves together in honor of the girl who'd sacrificed herself for all of them... Gustus and Indra flanked the Sky People, scanning the crowd for any anarchists or rogue dissenters, all the while attempting to stifle the surprising amount of sorrow working against them as Titus stood unmoved, impassive beside them - satisfied, even.

Lincoln had supported Wells's body weight with his own throughout the entirety of the ceremony, fearful that the boy would collapse if the warrior moved away from him, needing the support nearly
as much as the other boy. Octavia stood by his side, her arms wrapped around a trembling Belou next to Nyko, his arms protectively shielding Zenya, the foursome unable to do anything but stare straight ahead, do their best not to allow their grief to show too plainly...

Meanwhile, Maya had watched slightly back and away from the stage, the smallest of the children from the Maun-de cradled in her arms, another holding her hand while the rest waited by Thomas's bedside in the clinic. They'd all sworn fealty to the Commander upon their entry to Polis, placed in temporary housing and adorned in the basic clothing of the apprentices for the time-being. No one but those at the very top knew the true identity of the newcomers, and they were told not to speak to anyone until they'd been trained in the Grounder ways. It'd been a given that they'd attend the service for Clarke, pay tribute to the girl who'd saved them - it was only right, after all...

Anya had taken the place of her Commander who'd watched on from the back of the stage, expression devoid of all emotion and eyes ringed with circles as dark as the many torturous nights where sleep had mercilessly evaded her. Lexa had apparently refused to take part in the ceremony, citing her desire not to overshadow the Mountain-Slayer's legend as her reason for staying in the shadows - though only a handful of those closest to her knew the real reason, and had more-than-willingly taken over the proceedings in the hopes of sparing the girl from more agony.

The memorial was truly beautiful - historic, even -, an unprecedented amount of disparaging clans gathered together to mourn the loss of a prodigal savior, a tragic martyr. Even representatives from Azgeda intermingled - though they carried a secret that darkened their eyes to an impossible degree, a lie so delicately balanced between circumstance and fraud that could undo everything around them...

Beneath the veiled beauty of every petal blooming on the white roses covering the stage and carried in the hands of onlookers, though, was a festering sort of sickness - a blackness that settled at the very roots of the flowers, unseen and unheard, withering within the soul of a single person, the one who would always come to bear such things...

Lexa was nothing but a shell of a person now, wholly unrecognizable down to the very reflection she cast to herself - a prime example of what happened to a person when their entire universe was rendered uninhabitable, their tether to life, itself, severed by a ruthless knife rusted with the blood of innocence and peace.

Memories of oceans as blue as the most precious of sapphires, a soul housed in the greatest of depths, a home built on the lips of one who brought meaning to a four letter word most humans spend their lives hoping to define... They had become the ghosts that haunted the Commander's every waking minute, all whilst her own emerald soul - as broken as the glass torn from the panes of holy temples long-gone - wandered the earth in search of its lost mate, pleading with the highest of powers to never have to return again....

One Year Later
Clarke watched from her usual place to Nia's right as the woman cut the tongue from a man who'd dared to speak out against the public lashing of his daughter that had taken place the day before. The blonde's expression was blank, unfeeling, familiar numbness taking the place of undesired emotion as she watched yet another life fall to ruin before her eyes.

It had become almost second-nature for her to tune out the suffering of those around her, creating a devastating amount of cognitive dissonance in her brain as she'd been forced to defy every value that had ever been instilled in her - every instinct that told her to care, protect, do something... She'd had to suppress that part of herself a long time ago, and part of her wondered if, in that same process of suppression, she'd actually managed to destroy that piece of herself, altogether. At this point, she wouldn't be the least bit surprised...

"Take this fool from my sight," Nia spat, motioning dismissively to the man who lay crumpled before her, blood spewing from lips parted in pure, soundless agony. The guards at the back of the court moved immediately to obey their Queen, roughly hoisting the man up by his shoulders and dragging him back down the aisle and out of the room.

Clarke clenched and un-clenched her jaw for a moment, arms clasped behind her back in a stance that most likely appeared impassive to the casual observer - though it barely managed to conceal the storm of fury constantly brewing underneath, always on the verge being unleashed as of late...

Nia moved to sink back down on her thrown, swiping a hand down her face as if exasperated to have to deal with such nonsense.

"You will take care of the next ingrate who dares to interrupt my peace, seken," Nia commanded, not even bothering to spare Clarke a glance as she spoke. "I'd like them to be strung up in the marketplace for all to see from now on... I am tired of their filthy blood staining my tiles."

Clarke closed her eyes for a moment, fighting the urge to scream as her throat worked painfully.

"Of course, ai kwin - as you wish," she answered after a beat, voice empty, echoing, completely separated from herself now.

She'd gone so long without a heartbeat, after all...

Before another word could be spoken from either one of them, Ontari suddenly burst through the doors at the back of the court, stride quick and purposeful as her expression worked to contain her displeasure. She stopped at the base of the steps leading to Nia's throne, inclining her head respectfully towards the older woman.
"My Queen," she began, a strange undercurrent slipping through, "another one of the Commander's messengers has made an unexpected visit to our lands... I barely managed to convince him to wait outside for my return, as he seems to have been instructed not to accept anything less than a formal audience with you this time..."

Nia made a sound of disgust in the back of her throat, obviously angered by the persistence of the leader she so thoroughly loathed.

Clarke, on the other hand, was now fighting against the powerful racing of her heart and the painful constriction of her throat that always seemed to occur at the mere mention of the Commander, more excruciating than anything she'd ever known. Perhaps it was simply her body's way of showing that it recognized the formal title by which her heart and soul were more publicly known...

"That is the fourth intrusion she has made into my territory this week, alone," Nia noted through gritted teeth, gripping onto the armrests of her thrown with white knuckles. "Does she really believe that I will continue to allow such petulance to go unanswered?!"

Ontari shared a weighted glance with Clarke, both girls seemingly of the same mind when it came to this particular issue - though, they despised each other in every other possible way...

For all intents and purposes, Nia had answered, usually sending the poor messengers back with a missing limb or disfiguring burn. She'd refused every single one of the Commander's attempts to begin some type of correspondence over the past few months, and - though it did not seem to be enough to warrant an all-out war, as the queen and her subjects had remained startlingly compliant with the laws they typically defied in the wake of the Maun-de's fall otherwise -, the attempts seemed to be increasing in their persistence.

"Seken, attend to your rounds as usual. I will not have our routine interrupted by the whims of a child masked as an exercise of power," Nia spat out, motioning dismissively to Clarke, the blonde inclining her head in acquiescence almost immediately. "Ontari, bring the messenger in as soon as Klark has gone... Let's you and I show him just how pleased we are that he has come to see us, shall we?" Ontari grinned menacingly, matching that of her Queen's as they prepared for yet another "correspondence" with one of the Commander's messengers.

Clarke simply grit her teeth in disgust, slipping through the hidden back door of the court and out into the chilled night air, hugging her cloak a little closer to her as the wind blew it about. Her steps were silent as she made her way across the empty marketplace, the moon high up in the sky and reflecting off of the snow in her path. The blonde made her way to the tree line bordering the marketplace on the left side, slipping through the darkness like a thief in the night.

After a few more minutes of silent trekking, Clarke finally found her favorite perch - a gathering of boulders that sat atop a hillside overlooking the largest village within the boundaries of Azgeda, their unofficial capitol. She settled in, removing the dagger from her belt and twirling it between her fingers, scanning the outskirts of the village for any sign of intruders, any lone bounty-hunters for hire sent to gather reconnaissance on Nia and her subordinates. In the past five days alone, Clarke had killed seven of them, and the volume of these rogue hunters sent to stalk them seemed to be increasing by the hour. Roan had his theories on who was sending them - the Commander being at the top of the list -, but Ontari was convinced that they were either Blue Cliff or Trikru, two of Azgeda's worst enemy clans. Over the course of the past month, they'd seen more stealth attacks of this nature than for the rest of the time Clarke had been in Azgeda, altogether. It was as troublesome
as it was fascinating, and the blonde found the carefully-crafted soldier within just ached for a chance to be on the front lines of an expedition employed to figure out what was going on - if only so that she could get out of Azgeda for awhile...

As she continued to scan the village lit by torches reflecting off of the snow, the various huts and shops settled between the ruins of a forgotten city now re-purposed for the use of the fierce warriors under Nia's command, Clarke became lost in thought, wondering when, exactly, the cold and desolate landscape had begun to feel like home... Not her true home, of course - the one she often saw in her dreams, cloaked in soft light and housed within the depths of emerald stones so rare, so lovely, the one she could only pray still existed...

No, this home was found in the kind eyes of the villagers she would pass during her rounds, in the interactions with the people whom she now knew to be completely misunderstood and misjudged - swept into the same category as a Queen who was neither loved nor revered by her people. These people were real, and they were good...

They treated Clarke like a goddess, a being of divinity sent down to save them all - and, as far as they were concerned, she'd already done so once before. She was the Mountain-Slayer, after all, and the fact that she acted as the central village healer simply fed her local reputation as a saint - a saint shrouded in utmost secrecy, of course. Clarke didn't mind, though, would've done anything to be able to attend to these people in such a way, clinging onto some semblance of normalcy from what felt like a past life. She helped them far more often and far more kindly than Nia ever would've been able to, and for that, they worshipped the blonde - which, in Nia's mind, simply re-affirmed the woman's assertion that Clarke's presence by her side would lead to somewhat of a golden age for Azgeda, a time in which the people somewhat respected her authority solely for the sake of being able to benefit from the Seken Kom Haiplana. Clarke hated how perfectly things had turned out for the Nia so far...

In addition to the benefits reaped by the Queen while within the confines her own kingdom, the woman had also been able to look forward to being seen in some semblance of a positive light in the eyes of the rest of the clans. This was due to the fact that, under Nia's orders, the warriors of Azgeda - the only ones allowed to leave the kingdom - had begun cooperating with the Commander since the time of Clarke's memorial. They did not resist their Heda's orders as they normally did, instead offering to assist in whatever training exercises or visitations that seemed to require more manpower in supporting their Heda. Though it seemed to appease the members of the Coalition who normally held such a high level of hostility for the problematic clan, the blonde knew that it was all a lie - a facade intended to keep the attention away from Azgeda, divert the collective gaze from looking north...

Very few knew of the real reason behind Azgeda's sudden and collective change of behavior, many citing the change as a result of the newfound peace achieved in the aftermath of the Maun-de's demise. The Commander had only required the presence of the clan leaders within her Coalition once since that demise, the meeting taking place during the annual festival honoring the date during which their Heda had united them all together in the first place.

The festival had occurred roughly a month after Mt. Weather's destruction, and Nia had shocked every last person present by kneeling before the Commander she was known to hate with every fiber of her being and swearing fealty to the girl, claiming her motivation to be a renewed sense of faith in the leader whose reign saw the fall of their greatest enemy - as wholly false as the forced smile she wore upon her face the entire time...
Lexa, for her part, had apparently accepted the fealty without so much as a flash of acknowledgement sparking across her deadened features, resembling something of a pale corpse upon her throne that day - a shadow of the woman she once was. The Commander's appearance at the festival, in the first place, had thoroughly surprised - and concerned - those closest to her, as the girl had spent most of her days hidden away in her chambers, her soul-crushing grief rendering her fitfully ill most of the time, a leader now hardened to every emotion the world sought to inflict upon her... Luckily for her, though, the fall of the Mountain had granted the Commander reprieve from a large part of the more demanding aspects of her position, and the time of peace had provided her with a space for her all-encompassing despair - a time she hadn't had previously to mourn the loss of her last love. (Though, for anyone who knew her well enough, it had appeared that Lexa had allowed herself to be completely consumed by the depth of her despair this time, easily overpowered by the loss of, perhaps, the truest love of her entire existence...)

When she did attend to the various day-to-day activities required of her as Commander, Lexa seemed nothing more than an empty shell upon her throne, hearing the pleas of many through ears still ringing with the sounds of an explosion, her own screams rattling constantly within her mind...

The real reason for Nia's sudden compliance, though, was Clarke, of course - the girl she'd spent a year trying to remake in her own image, whose role in the Commander's change of demeanor was wholly unknown to her. The blonde had been kept mostly in the shadows for the first six months of her time in Azgeda, beaten and bloodied until she no longer saw a point in screaming anymore, as it would have occupied her time as much as breathing did...

Clarke had resisted at first, as any human might thrash and scream as the noose was place around their neck, the floorboards removed from beneath their feet.

Due to the fact that both of the blonde's legs had been healing for the first couple of months in Nia's captivity, that time had been used for what the Queen had unaptly called "mental rehabilitation" - or, as Clarke referred to that particularly torturous period of time in her training, her mind's undoing...

She'd been moved from the small room that'd contained her original sickbed to a dungeon-like cell underground, a windowless hell hole with chains on every wall, a single rock-hard bed devoid of bed furs tucked into the corner. The Queen's guards had immediately chained Clarke to her bed, carelessly dumping her there to be left in solitude for the foreseeable future, her only company that of the elderly man who would bring her three measly meals a day and check the progress of her injuries.

Even that small ounce of human treatment had tapered off eventually, though - the elderly man ceasing his check-ups after what felt like only a few short days -, and Clarke had soon found herself having to resort to scratching hash marks into the wall beside her bed with chewed off and bloodied fingernails to keep track of the time. Clarke had been subjected to solitary confinement before - that wasn't the problem... No, what'd truly left her in a state of near mental-incapacitation was the amount of time she'd been left alone with her own thoughts, free to torment herself over every little thing she'd ever done wrong, without knowing when it would end. There was no sentence, no set timeframe after which she knew she was going to be set free, and it had positively eaten away at her...

By the 50th hash mark on the wall, Clarke was legitimately talking to the ghosts that paced the small dungeon cell beside her, recalling the most simple of anecdotes from when she was a child that, in her degenerated state of mind, had seemed far too good to be true - even as mundane as they were... Her personal hygiene had gone out the window, having to roll around in her own filth for days on
end without being able to move from her bed more often than not, her legs still weakened but relatively healed. She'd been wearing the same soiled nightgown that she'd woken up in with Echo by her side, and the thing had been tattered to pieces by that point, nothing but rags hanging off her gaunt frame. The two meals given to her by a mute handmaiden - a woman whom Clarke had tried to engage in conversation with at first, desperate for anything, but had given up on when she realized the woman's affliction - were just enough to keep her from passing away from malnutrition, but not enough to get her out of that state of weakness one feels right before fainting from desolate blood-sugar levels.

All in all, Clarke couldn't recall a time when she'd ever felt less like a person, and it'd worked exactly like Nia had wanted it to...

By the 60th hash mark, Clarke had been quite literally beating her head against the stone wall, a gash forming in her forehead slowly but surely as she whispered old lullabies to herself beneath her breath. She was broken, pathetic, rocking herself back-and-forth on her bed as the eyes of hundreds of souls glared at her from the darkness all around her. She'd pleaded with them so many times - asking for retribution, absolution, **anything** - but they never responded, simply retreating back into the dark to wait for another moment of the blonde's peace to disturb, to ruin... It'd always been so dark, and Clarke hadn't had fresh air in so long that she couldn't even remember what it tasted like - couldn't remember what the sky looked like as the sun set, as the stars dusted the vast expanse of the universe for miles...

That was when they'd known it was time.

When Clarke had started tasting the blood from the gash in her forehead, that was when they'd stepped in. Nia, Roan, and two of the guards had come in, unshackled Clarke from the wall - barely even sparing a thought for the blonde's condition - and carried her out of the dungeon. It'd been too good to be true, and Clarke had been forced to find refuge in blackness, in a state of being far less torturous than the one that seemed to be her permanence now...

The next time Clarke had woken, she'd been completely disoriented, coming back to consciousness in a second-floor room in what appeared to be the ruins of an old merchant's building from Before, nothing in the room but a white sheet in the middle of the floor. Though she'd been shackled once again, she hadn't been able to help the cry of relief that'd loosed from her when she'd noticed the clean clothes that'd adorned her freshly-bathed frame - a long-sleeved tunic and soft pants, closely resembling the uniforms of the apprentices in Polis.

Clarke had quickly learned that her comfort was temporary, though, as the very next moment, Nia was entering the room with Roan by her side, a fearsome warrior the size of a giant flanking them both, Echo slipping into the back of the room to watch in silence, lips forming a hard line... It was then, in that moment, after Clarke had reached her human breaking point, that the **Seken Kom Haiplana's** real training had begun...

Clarke had read little snippets about the study of psychology from Before, about the various disorders and methods of classifying people and their personality types - the ins-and-outs of human behavior. Unfortunately for the blonde, though, she'd must've skimmed the section on conditioning and "re-programming," as Nia had liked to call it, and she found that she was utterly powerless against it...
Following the single ring of a small silver bell crafted from the village's metal smith, Clarke would immediately be subjected to immense physical pain at Nia's hand - anything ranging from the complete removal of a fingernail to a white-hot brand of the *Azgeda* symbol into the bare skin between her shoulder blades, always in the same place, never quite allowed to heal completely. She'd received little to no medical attention afterwards, and she knew she'd bear a permanent scar on her back in the shape of the clearly-defined symbol for the rest of her days... By the fifth day of this brutal sort of conditioning multiple times a day, Clarke was nothing more than a slave to the bell, dropping to her knees and folding in on herself at the mere *sight* of the damned thing. Even still, the queen insisted on continuing with this phase of her training until it got to the point where Clarke would become a trembling, crying mess anytime Nia's hand would go to her belt, terrified that the bell would be there somehow - even though she knew every single detail of the case it was usually kept in...

At that point, not only was Clarke near-deranged from her time of malnourishment and self-inflicted inner turmoil in round-the-clock solitary confinement, but she was also now a much more pathetic and unstable version of Pavlov's dogs, subordinate to an inanimate object, and she *hated* herself for it...

The next phase of her "re-programming" had, in many regards, been on par with the level of brutality of the first phases, though Clarke found that she'd actually preferred this part to anything that'd happened prior - a sign of just how far gone she'd become... For, in this stage, she'd officially begun her formal training as a warrior - only, this training was vastly different than anything she would've experienced under *Trikru* guidance, and it'd simply reinforced her dwindling state of mind even further...

Before she'd been able to begin fight training, Clarke had been chained up to a post in the center of the village marketplace, subjected to the frigid climate day-in and day-out as various *Azgeda* warriors came at random intervals to either strike her with their fists or cut into her skin with small knives, never quite doing enough damage to permanently scar her but leaving just enough of an open wound for it to sting. She'd been told that the more she screamed, the longer she'd be kept chained up, so she reconciled herself not to make any sound at all - *ever*.

Nia was impressed with her *seken*, to say the least, often observing the blonde from the shadows to watch the visible hardening of a girl she'd originally seen as so incredibly weak into an impenetrable statue.

It was during that particular phase - during the moments when Clarke was afraid that her still-weakened legs would give out beneath her at the amount of physical and mental torture she'd been forced to endure, chained to a wooden totem like a wild animal - that something had finally snapped within her. That something had been building inside of her for weeks now, bubbling and churning below the surface of her skin like the waves of a hurricane, and it was nearly as permanent as the aligning of her soul with its mate had once been...

Gone was the wide-eyed innocent girl who wept for those she lost and begged for the solace of green eyes and gentle smiles. That girl was long-dead, erased from the Earth along with the souls of hundreds of others brutally ripped from this life with the press of a button, never to return again... In her place was a soldier, a being as cold as the air that bit into her skin like the lash of a whip, a creature of deadly fury and brutal instinct.

A being now completely in survival mode.
The moment Nia had seen it - seen that tether that'd snapped deep within the depths of oceans now frozen over from within - she'd grinned maliciously from the shadows, ready to begin the final phase of her seken's training: combat.

From that point forward, Clarke had been trained as any other warrior of Azgeda before her, as fierce as the most deadly of mercenaries from the very start... She was woken every morning at the break of dawn, immediately dressing and hurrying out to join the ranks as they completed their morning jogs through the hills, building endurance and muscle for the purpose of increasing their overall stamina in battle. Then, she'd usually get paired off with Ontari or Roan for private training and sparring under the watch of the Queen - Echo never too far away, providing the blonde a strange comfort in the midst of unfamiliar chaos -, punished with the ringing of the bell or the lash of a whip when she'd make even the smallest of mistakes, the tiniest of errors in her stance. As much as the blonde hated to admit it, though, the constant threat of punishment made her learn that much faster and soon, she got to a point where even the most seasoned of warriors couldn't disarm her, couldn't even dream of getting close enough to take a shot at her.

Clarke grew stronger and faster by the day, all lean muscle and instant reflexes, much healthier as a result of the strict diet routine of the Azgeda warriors, providing their bodies with all of the necessary nutrients while simultaneously preparing them to survive in even the harshest of conditions with regimented eating schedules. She was healthy and stable for the first time in what felt like a lifetime, and she wasn't about to give it up by doing something reckless or selfish in any regard - like trying to escape....

It was all about surviving now...

Clarke had become the most renowned warrior in all of Azgeda within the span of months, known as Seken Kom Haiplana to the greater public, her true identity kept a secret due to the fact that only seasoned warriors could leave the kingdom - though Nia's subjects never would've said anything to begin with out of fear of retribution... Clarke was ruthless, fearless, and unbeatable. Making mistakes was not in her nature anymore, a well-oiled machine trained to follow orders and execute to perfection.

She operated as an impenetrable shell of her former self, having completely blocked out any thoughts that might deter her from her purpose as a mindless soldier. She couldn't even entertain the thought of escaping, partly out of a strange sense of duty to the people of Azgeda and partly because she felt as if she'd be unrecognizable to all those she used to know and love, and she didn't know if she could handle that... So much had happened in the span of time that she'd been gone - the arrival of the Ark to the ground being one of them, though Clarke had no way of knowing whether or not anyone had survived or anything else, for that matter -, and she found that she could no longer imagine herself in the same place she'd been before, thinking the same thoughts and having the same conversations...

There was also the matter of the ghost that seemed to have taken the place of her shadow as of late, all brown hair and soft green eyes that held the stories of an entire existence now completely separate from herself - an existence she longed to be able to fit back into more than anything else, but didn't know if she could anymore...

That was another issue entirely, though. Clarke couldn't allow herself to dwell on such things for longer than a fleeting minute every now and then, afraid that anything more would cause fissures to
form in her otherwise unbreakable shell. She'd been able to stay focused so far, though, and she would continue to do so until fate provided her an alternative...

*All I can do now is survive...*

After eight months of brutal training beyond anything Clarke would've ever been able to imagine, she'd finally been sworn in as the first *Seken Kom Haiplana* in nearly half a century. The ceremony had been held in the main marketplace in the dead of night, drawing the entire kingdom out to watch as the markings of *Azgeda* were cut into Clarke's cheeks and forehead, her braided hair given a single blue streak from a concoction made by some of Nia's handmaidens.

The Queen had watched on proudly from her throne set upon an elevated platform at the center of the stage, her eyes reflecting the torches that burned brightly around the marketplace in a grand circle. The woman was wholly convinced that she'd officially become the master of the universe, the conqueror of the hardest-fought of battles - the woman who'd managed to re-shape a legend in the palms of her hands and craft a completely different tale modeled after her own twisted vision.

Roan, for his part, had been exceptionally satisfied, as well, his eyes dancing with mirth as he'd stood beside a fuming and loathsome Ontari, the girl rendered a jealous mess in the wake of Clarke's symbolic rise to power. To the blonde's dismay, though, Echo had been suspiciously absent that night, and Clarke had searched the entire perimeter of the marketplace at first in the hopes of spotting the girl amongst the crowd. As soon as she'd realized the warrior was nowhere in sight, though, Clarke had simply turned back to face Nia as the woman had risen from her throne, the blonde's new dagger in one hand and her own sword in the other.

Clarke had then dropped to her knees, literally and figuratively swearing herself over to a life of emptiness and bloodshed, of duty and sacrifice to a faulty cause...

*An existence crafted solely out of a need to survive.*
"Clarke, wake up! Get dressed and come quickly!!" Echo's urgent voice roused the blonde from her typically restless sleep, too short-lived to ever be considered healthy. "We must hurry!"

Clarke sat up immediately, kicking her legs over the side of her bed and eyeing Echo standing in the doorway, eyes wide and incredibly nervous. The blonde's own eyes narrowed as she took in the sight of the girl who'd somehow become her only friend in all of this - a constant presence and a kind of solace as Clarke had been put through the ringer -, the warrior much more pale and agitated than usual.

"What's going on?" Clarke asked calmly, wholly unbothered in her state of lingering grogginess, taking her sweet time in walking over to the wardrobe on the far side of her room and rifling through the contents slowly. Echo hurried over to her, looking dramatically perturbed now.

"You don't understand, Clarke," she stated hotly, grabbing the blonde by the shoulder so they now stood face-to-face in front of the open wardrobe. "Nia is going to kill him - the man Ontari found lurking around the border during her rounds early this morning... She's going to kill him, and it could mean war."

That got Clarke's attention immediately. For, they'd all known that it was only a matter of time before Nia crossed the line, before she made it so that the Coalition had no choice but to act against her. Everything leading up to this point had been a silly game - Nia's little form of rebellion in the form of maimed messengers and requests for audience with her Heda left unanswered -, but this was different.

*Murder* was different.

"I'll be there as quickly as I can," Clarke promised her friend, Echo nodding curtly in response and turning on her heels to hasten out of the room, all but slamming the door shut behind her.

Clarke took a slow, deep breath, centering herself as she normally did before yet another long day spent either maiming or killing innocents at the queen's every whim. Yet another day spent loathing every part of herself, despising everything about the cold and hardened soldier she'd become.

*Surviving* ...

Clarke quickly changed out of her loose sleep clothes, slipping on her usual form-fitting black pants with leather stitched into the knees below a black long-sleeved top that buckled in several places across her chest and over her shoulders, knife holsters stitched into the outer fabric of the forearms. She laced on her dark leather steel-toed combat boots and fastened her fur-lined and hooded navy blue cloak that dusted the floor, as much as part of her now as her own limbs.

Clarke then made her way across the room and into her bathroom, turning on the ancient faucet and bending to splash ice-cold water over her face, barely even flinching against the pain. Catching sight of her own reflection as she straightened back up, she slowed, staring into eyes that no longer looked like her own, too dulled and grey of a blue to truly belong to her anymore...
Her cheekbones were much more defined, her jawline sharper as a result of the leaner frame she now sported, muscles toned and tight as that of any warrior's should be, her hair framing her face in waves that fell past her breasts with braids and blue streaks scattered within. The tribal markings across her cheekbones and above her eyebrows had healed into rather ethereal looking white scars, as permanent as any other feature on the blonde's face now, and Clarke couldn't help the little spark of pride that flared in her chest at the sight of them.

If there's one thing she'd managed to remember from her mother's teachings when she was little, it was that scars were never supposed to be seen as ugly, unattractive, or even sad. They were a gift; a physical marking for all to see, a symbol of a person who had walked through hell all alone and had managed to emerge victorious on the other side, a person now born again - a *survivor* ... Clarke would wear the scars proudly for the rest of her days, just as she would the brand that remained prominent between her shoulder blades - signs of brutality survived, torment ended...

*One torment ended to begin another...*

Remembering the task at hand, Clarke moved back into action, striding purposefully from the bathroom to grab the multiple knives and daggers - never having been presented with an actual sword for whatever reason - from her bedside table and tuck them into the various sheathes on her person.

With that, Clarke hastily made her way from her room, clomping down the stairs of the ancient ruins she now occupied - what must've been a government building at some point. Making her way through the front door at a near-run, the frigid morning air hitting her like a tiny needles poking into exposed skin. The blonde simply huffed in annoyance, walking purposefully towards an event that could change everything for *Azgeda* ...

The moment Clarke burst through the back door to the queen's court, her heart nearly stopped.

Kneeling at the bottom of the steps before Nia's throne was a face the blonde hadn't seen in what felt like decades - had thought she'd never see again, frankly -, nearly unrecognizable now as blood dripped down his face in streams from a deep gash at his hairline and a long cut above his eyebrow framing a right eye almost completely swollen shut. His handsome face was now left a grotesque mask of gore, blood intermingling with sweat in the untrimmed beard he sported, his dark hair long and pulled back into a bun. He sported the dark and layered garb of the Commander's warriors, and Clarke was thrown.

*It can't be...*
"Jax?" Clarke rasped in disbelief, voice a harsh whisper in the weighted silence of the large room.

Several heads all whipped around at once to look at her, noticing her arrival for the first time as her voice seemed to echo off of every surface. The court was unsurprisingly sparse of people - Nia most likely having ordered everyone but her best warriors away -, and Echo was standing beside Roan towards the back of the room, two guards standing watch by the main doors and one by the back door Clarke had just entered from. Nia stood before her throne, glaring down at a kneeling Jax whose hands were tied together in front of him, a scowling Ontari pressing a dagger against his throat and holding him by the back of the neck - as if ready to slit his throat at any moment now.

At the sound of his name, Jax's one good eye had darted over to lock onto Clarke, uncomprehending at first but then lighting with a flurry of emotions that flashed through them as recognition dawned across his features. His jaw dropped open, body jolting as if physically taken aback, and he paled beneath the blood and cuts marring his features as if he were looking upon a ghost - which, as far as he knew, she was...

"C- clarke?" he whispered, her name heavy on his tongue as if it might cause her to disappear should he say it any louder. He involuntarily moved towards the blonde, hissing loudly as Ontari's dagger immediately bit into the skin of his neck, drawing blood.

Clarke moved slowly to stand beside Nia's throne, unable to look away from Jax as the man's eye now scanned her face wildly, frantically trying to understand.

"You know this traitor, seken?" Nia spat, eyeing Clarke from the corner of her vision as her mouth turned downwards, clearly fighting off the urge to gnash her teeth.

 Clarke was simply stunned, her heart rate spiking as her breaths became labored, the air around her seeming to condense and press into her skin like a tangible fog.

 This can't be happening...

"You will answer me, seken! Now!!" Nia shouted, momentarily snapping Clarke out of her revery as the blonde looked to her, eyes wide and slightly apologetic. Jax was looking between the two women with a bit of understanding lighting his gaze now, lips forming a tight line as he clenched his hands into white-knuckled fists in front of him.

"I-I... His d-daughter was one of my patients back in Polis," Clarke stammered, looking desperately to Echo and Roan at the back of the court, both warriors wearing grim expressions now. Clarke couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so out of her depth...

"He's just a stable boy - "

"Just a stable boy?!" Nia cut her off incredulously, taking an aggressive step towards the blonde who remained unmoved, standing her ground and finding an odd comfort zone amidst the hostile treatment from the queen now. "Do you not see the markings on his face?! That worthless branwoda is a defector, seken - a coward who should have been strung up and slaughtered along with his useless wife many years ago!!"
At the mention of his late love, Isabella, Jax growled fiercely, jerking forward as if to launch himself at Nia but immediately halted by a blow to his throat by the end of the dagger handle from Ontari, the hit causing the man to double over in a fit of bloody coughs. Clarke stepped forward almost instinctually, brows creasing with worry as she blindly made to help the man, but she stopped herself short, swallowing thickly as she worked through her desire to go to him. She couldn't allow herself to succumb to emotions now; it would do neither herself nor Jax any good in their current situation...

"I caught him snooping around the southernmost boundary of the village, ai kwin," Ontari spoke up, clearly annoyed that such a production was being made out of all of this. "He bears no message of any kind, and he refuses to state his purpose in our territory beyond that... I say he should be hung."

"Now, let's not get too dramatic here," Roan interjected suddenly, coming forward slightly with Echo on his heels, both exceptionally apprehensive now - attempting to appeal to their queen. "We all know what will happen if you kill him, mother, and I, for one, don't fancy starting a war that we've all worked so hard to avoid up until this point over one measly traitor - "

"Enough, Roan!!" Nia cut her son off harshly, holding up her hand as if to halt their forward progress. It seemed to work, as he and Echo stopped immediately in their tracks, glancing sideways at each other to share a weighted glance.

Clarke couldn't move, couldn't think, couldn't breathe...

This can't be happening...

"I will not tolerate such insolence in my court... This man is a scourge on the landscape of this kingdom, lesser than even the lowest of scum on this earth... He must be dealt with accordingly, and, if the Commander feels that my actions warrant her starting a war that she cannot - and will not - win, then so be it. We will be at war... Let her try to defeat me now."

Ontari was grinning maliciously as she grabbed Jax by the hair, yanking his head back to more fully expose the column of his throat as the man winced, and Clarke couldn't breathe, could barely hear anything as the blood roared relentlessly in her ears...

This isn't right... I can't just stand here and let her do this... I can't let this happen...

I refuse to let this happen.

"Stop!!" Clarke called out, voice surprisingly firm, stepping closer to Nia as the woman looked over at her, eyes ablaze now. "He's innocent. They're always innocent, ai kwin. He bears no threat to us like this, and I-I can't let you do this - I can't let you kill him... I won't."

Ontari scoffed, rolling her eyes as if witnessing the petulant whining of a child to its mother. Roan and Echo were frozen, looking between Clarke and Nia as if waiting for a tether to snap. Jax was breathing harshly, good eye glued to Clarke as if silently begging her not to risk herself any further
The air around them was nearly suffocating now...

Before Clarke could even realize what was happening, she was suddenly collapsed on the ground in a fetal position, crying out at the harsh sound now ringing through the air.

*The bell...*

It was like the sound of metal snapping bones, knives puncturing organs, women screaming for their slain children... Every evil in the world, every waking nightmare, morphing together into the high-pitched and ear-splitting keen of a single ringing bell, and Clarke was powerless against it - the impenetrable and unbeatable warrior nowhere to be found within her.

Nia bent down beside her, leaning over to whisper in Clarke’s ear as she continued to ring the bell above the blonde's head, causing the girl to writhe and scream beneath her.

"Do you wish to be strung up in the center of the village again, *seken*? To have warriors cut into your skin with blades dipped in venom, perhaps?" Nia hissed menacingly into her ear, gripping Clarke by the throat as she writhed, digging her fingernails into the pliable skin on either side of the blonde's neck hard enough to draw blood. "Rest assured - you will be punished accordingly for this little outburst soon enough... I will not tolerate such behavior from you, *Klark*, and if you wish to continue fighting with two hands in the future, I suggest you quickly learn your place... Am I understood?"

Clarke hadn't realized that the bell had stopped ringing until that moment, and all she could do was look away from the woman as Nia stood back up, nodding and fighting back bile from rising in her throat as her vision continued to swim.

*How could such a merciless soldier still be so pathetic - slave to an object?!*

As Clarke turned over to meet Jax's terrified gaze on her, time suddenly came to a brutal standstill, the world around her stopping mid-rotation...

This was not her. This numb, cold, and ruthless shell of a human being...

This was not the girl who used to stand on her father's feet as he spun her around the room to the jazz music of *Before*, the girl who would beg random passerby in the hallways of the Ark to pose for her so that she could draw their likeness. This was not the girl who'd memorized the constellations modeled after Ancient Greek mythology for the sole purpose of rubbing her knowledge in Wells's face, the girl who used to laugh until she cried at the old re-runs of cartoons the Ark would show while curled up in between her mother and father... This was not the girl who'd landed on this planet more than a year ago, the girl who'd been dragged from her pod wreckage by two children who spoke a foreign tongue, who'd been introduced to the ways of clans and warriors that'd seemed as ancient as time, itself - who'd found a new home in the culture whose people had welcomed her with open arms and warm hearts.

This was not the girl who'd discovered a newfound sense of life and purpose on the lips of the greatest love of her existence, the purest of souls that'd provided her such comfort and solace as her
mate, in whose embrace she'd have happily stayed in for the rest of her days...

This was not her...

She was Clarke Griffin, daughter of Jake and Abigail - kind, intelligent, compassionate, and true. Though an entire lifetime of blood and suffering - of murder and torment - had seemingly separated her from the person she once was, she was still Clarke...

She was still Clarke, and she was not going to let this happen.

Time seemed to start back up as Ontari began to cut into Jax's neck, and Clarke rolled over and up onto her feet in a blur of movement.

"NO!!"

With a fierce cry ripping out of her chest, Clarke moved to grab onto the handle of the dagger sheathed on her right forearm, loosing it free and throwing it with brutal force and deadly accuracy, watching it hurtle end-over-end through the air and bury itself to the hilt in Ontari's left eye socket with a sickening crunch. The girl's body hadn't even dropped to the floor before Clarke was pivoting on her heels to face the opposite direction, loosing the other dagger on her opposite forearm and launching it through the air and into the throat of the guard a few steps behind her with such force that it knocked the man's body back and pinned him to the door.

Barely a breath later, Clarke was turning and launching herself off of the steps, breaking into a run as the two guards who'd been stationed at the main door came forward to face her. Neither of them even had the chance to grab their weapons as Clarke came at them full speed, though, the blonde immediately going for the guard on the right. When he was nearly two feet from her, she jumped mid-run, using her forward momentum to rotate her torso expertly as she brought her right leg up and around to make contact with the man's jaw with the steel-toe of her boot. His bones snapped with an audible crack at the impact of her boot as he stumbled sideways, dropping to his knees a little ways away from her as she used the opportunity to launch the smaller knife that'd been sheathed at her waist into the chest of the other guard to stop his progress towards her.

Bending to pick up the sword the first guard had dropped as she'd kicked him, Clarke moved forward as the second guard stumbled back, her knife buried to the hilt in his chest, wasting no time at all to plunge the other blade straight into the man's heart with her left hand, turning away from him immediately as his corpse collapsed into a bloody heap on the floor in front of her. Walking back to stand behind the guard who still remained kneeling a few feet from his dead companion, a dazed look on his face now, Clarke grabbed onto both sides of the man's head, staring blindly ahead of her as she snapped his neck without so much as a hint of hesitation.

She barely spared a glance at the positively stunned figures of Roan and Echo in her right periphery as she stepped over the dead guard and began stalkling towards the throne, both warriors seemingly frozen now as Clarke allowed her wrath to come unleashed...

Jax had scooted towards the left wall and away from the melee, watching with an awed expression on his bloodied face as Clarke bent down to remove the dagger from Ontari's skull, never slowing in
the pursuit of her target as she made her way up the steps now, eyes locked onto Nia's. Blood was roaring in her ears so loudly, the air so thick around her and her vision so tinged in red as it was, that Clarke couldn't even hear the ringing of the bell anymore - couldn't see it, either, her eyes locked solely onto Nia's like deadly beams of fury. The woman's eyes were widened with impossible fear, seemingly just as stunned as Roan and Echo in the wake of Clarke's storm of vengeance.

The blonde watched in satisfaction as the queen stumbled backwards, unaware of how close her throne had been under the weight her seken's murderous glare, and Clarke knew she had her chance.

In one fluid motion, Clarke brought her leg up to smash her knee into Nia's chest, sending the woman hurtling back into the seat of her throne, the wind knocked from her lungs with brutal force as she slammed into the wooden backrest. Synchronized with her next heartbeat, Clarke brought her left fist up and connected harshly with the woman's cheek, feeling bones snap beneath her knuckles as she immediately moved to do the same on the other side of Nia's face. Unleashing every ounce of strength she had on the queen now, Clarke whipped Nia's head from side-to-side with each punch, one-after-the-other in succession until she felt the skin of her knuckles crack and tear after a particularly ruthless blow - exactly the warrior Nia had made her to be...

Halting her movements and leaning back to admire her handiwork, breathing harshly, Clarke was maliciously pleased to see Nia's face now wholly unrecognizable, mangled and dripping blood from every orifice, the woman's right eye having been punctured on Clarke's last punch, a heartbeat barely obvious at the base of her throat. Not wanting to waste another moment, Clarke reached forward and grabbed onto the hair on the top of Nia's head, pulling the woman forward so that her lips brushed against the woman's left ear as she whispered one final message:

"Yu gonplei ste odon, ai kwin."

Moving so that her arm was fully extended where she held Nia away from her by the hair, Clarke threw the dagger up and caught it so that she had it more firmly by the handle in her left hand. The next moment, she cut straight across with the blade still covered in Ontari's black blood, decapitating the queen with one swift slash of her blade.

Clarke dropped the head immediately, stepping back as it fell to the floor in front of the throne with a sickening thud, Nia's body following not longer afterward. She simply stared down at the dagger in her left hand, watched as intermingled red and black blood dripped off the blade, the adrenaline that'd been roaring through her body now slowly washing away with every pump of new blood through her veins...

Time moved like murky water around her, the air growing thicker still with the smell of copper...

Clarke was having somewhat of an out-of-body experience, coming off the peak of her adrenaline high - unseeing, unfeeling... Too much...

What did she just do?

Suddenly, the sound of slow clapping echoed through the room from behind her, and Clarke was forced back into the present instantly, whipping around to gape at a slowly-approaching Roan and Echo, the prince... applauding her now, for whatever reason..
"Bravo, Clarke," he congratulated her drily, ceasing his applause as he and Echo came to a stop beside the dark blood pooling from Ontari's body. Roan stared up at Clarke with an expression tinged in wry amusement, lips forming a hard line as he studied her, Echo seemingly unable to meet the blonde's eyes as she stared down at Nia's dismembered corpse.

"That was quite the show..."

Clarke simply gaped at him, unable to process anything as her body began to tremble a little with the after-effects of her adrenaline rush.

*What had just happened?*

"I was beginning to think I'd have to do it myself, if I'm being honest with you," he continued, quirking an eyebrow as he shrugged a little. "I knew you'd crack eventually, though. I've seen it building in you for weeks now... Everyone has a breaking point, it seems."

He glanced sideways at Jax, shrugging again as the other man met his gaze, eyes darting wildly between Clarke to the prince where he sat against the wall. Clarke was nearly hyperventilating now, the blood of those she'd killed covering her hands.

*What had she done?*

"Wh- what the hell are you talking about?" Clarke inquired flatly, fighting off the slight trembling of her voice as she swayed a little on her feet, staring into Roan's nonchalant face in grave confusion.

The prince chuckled lightly, shaking his head a little as he glanced at the carnage all around him.

"Did you really think that I planned to let my mother use you as her own personal *puppet* for the rest of your life?" he asked her incredulously, stepping up onto the bottom step leading to the throne, eyes never leaving Clarke's face. "Not a chance in hell... I let her have her fun with you, train you, make you into the warrior I knew you could be - but not for the reason you think..."

He stepped up to be level with Clarke now, towering over her as he continued to appraise her, voice almost clinical as he explained himself.

"You see, I planted the seed in my mother's head for a much different purpose than she believed - not because I thought that you would help make her that much more revered amongst our people... No, I made her believe that she needed you as her *seken* after I heard the stories of how you interacted with the people of Polis, saw the fire that burned in your eyes when you came to me in the dungeons..."

He placed a surprisingly gentle hand on her shoulder, looking down into her eyes with excitement and promise now shining in his. Clarke didn't like where this was headed...

"You are a natural-born leader, Clarke. It may as well be in your blood... And now, you will lead."

Clarke's heart plummeted, shaking her head furiously as she tried to understand...

*What the hell is he talking about?*
Roan's grip tightened on her shoulder, a crooked grin now spreading across his face.

"As per Azgeda compendium and old law, should the ruler of our realm take a seken at any point, that person will surpass the bloodline and become next-in-line to the throne should anything ever happen to the acting King or Queen... Well, something clearly happened, and here we are."

Clarke was stunned, still somewhat uncomprehending as she gaped at the man, floundering.

"Th-that's bullshit, Roan, and you know it," she stuttered out, eyes wildly darting between both of his, searching for any hint of a lie. "You can't possibly have known that I'd -"

Clarke cut herself off, gulping down bile as she glanced at the queen's body, still oozing thick blood. The prince simply shrugged, seemingly unbothered.

"Of course not... I couldn't possibly have planned every single thing that'd happened over this past year, but the overarching plan remained the same," Roan informed her casually, shrugging once again. "Like I said, I would've killed her myself if you hadn't taken the initiative - if only to prevent that damned war..."

"Roan is right," Echo spoke up for the first time, coming up to stand beside the prince as she looked into Clarke's eyes, emotions swirling deep within the depths of her own. "Nia was never fit to rule our kingdom. She was vile and cruel, and she never cared for anyone but herself... Roan helped me see past my blind loyalty when he saw how much your treatment bothered me, and I - " She swallowed, seemingly struggling to find the right words as she looked at Clarke with the impossible gentleness of an old friend - a sister, even...

"I believe you will make a wonderful queen, Klark... I will stand by your side no matter what."

Echo's words stirred something deep within the blonde, and Clarke sucked in a sharp breath as tears began to prickle at the back of her eyes.

*Is this really happening?*

"Excellent! Now that that's settled...," Roan turned away from Clarke, clomping down the stairs and heading towards the main doors to the court with a surprisingly cheery demeanor as he stepped over the slain guards. "I'll take care of the handful of idiots still loyal to my mother, and then I'll make the announcement to the rest of the village, let it spread through the rest of the kingdom..."

Clarke's world was spinning now, Echo still watching the blonde closely as she continued to stand there, gawking after the prince, unseeing...

*This can't be happening...*

"Oh, and Clarke?" Roan turned around to face her once more, holding the handle of the door as
another crooked grin spread across his features.

"Welcome to the ruling class."

Chapter End Notes

aaaaannnndd that's a wrap folks!! Anyone surprised with how it ended? Or not at all, perhaps? Probably not the happy ending you'd expected, buuuut hopefully not too bad hahaha. I'd definitely love to hear what you thought, though, and I'll for sure be responding to comments this time!!
Thank you all SO MUCH for coming on this journey with me, and I hope some of you will be returning for part 2 - coming v soon! Expect that reunion you've been hoping for, interactions with the surviving Arkers, my version of an origin story (lol) & subsequent adventures, and looootttssss of Clexa (;

Catch ya on the flip side!!

End Notes

How'd I do? I'd love to hear your opinion!
Pretty frequent updates coming your way.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!