Heads and Hearts

by the_ktgrace

Summary

In the smoldering aftermath of the apocalypse, Arkadia offers safety and comfort in a blissful utopia with one main rule: People are sorted as Heads or Hearts. Heads think, Hearts feel. They work together, but don't understand each other. But when the perfect Head mixes with a fiery Heart, they begin to unravel secrets that could burn Arkadia to the ground.

Dystopian AU.
Slowburn Bellarke, Delinquent teamwork, mysteries and adventure and the works.
"When the dust settled in the ashes of the last World War, our planet laid in ruins. Billions dead, millions homeless. What had once been the United States was now disintegrated chaos. No more structure, no more security, no more hope.

But then, in a little corner on the east, a community rose from the ashes. A small colony on a hostile planet. They rebuilt a town, named it "Arkadia", and framed it with a wall. They opened their doors and arms to the frightened refugees at their gates, so long as they adhered to one rule: Be sorted into two categories: Heads, or Hearts.

Heads, the system tells us, are intelligent and logical. They act with their mind, and they are capable of finding solutions to the greatest problems that plague Arkadia. They are our doctors and engineers, our lawyers and teachers. Simply put, Heads are the thinkers.

Hearts take action. Their passion - and compassion for others - remains unmatched. They cater to the wellbeing of others, helping keep Arkadia safe and healthy. Without Hearts, we lose the very thing that keeps us human: our empathy for others.

And that's what Arkadia, and this system, is all about - preserving the human race in a world that's tried everything to destroy it."

When Thelonious Jaha finishes his speech, his arms are outstretched on either side like wings. His palms are open and facing outwards, a sign of acceptance and encouragement. His chin is raised and eyes lidded with a smile, and he seems to wear a halo of confidence and reassurance around him. His appearance is no finer than anyone else's, his clothes are just a little dull and showing wear, with the save exception the chancellor pin he wears on his breast.

The auditorium around him fills with resounding applause at his speech, a thunderous swell of clapping and cheers. It certainly isn't a new speech, or anything unfamiliar - some variation of it is repeated at every holiday, every special event. Everyone knows the story of Arkadia, of the system.
that they are sorted into. But it represents the very thing that Arkadia tries to provide: safety. Security. The story has been paraphrased and simplified a hundred times over, but the constancy is reassuring in itself. Arkadia has a history. It has an identity. Against the odds it has been dealt, it is surviving.

Chancellor Jaha stands against the mosaic tiled wall of the auditorium, thousands of stones and glass pieces depicting a sunrise breaking over distant hills. The rest of the auditorium is paneled wood, with a high ceiling and sunlight slipping in from windows overhead. Every seat is filled, and there is a natural division down the center of the room. It isn't planned or enforced, but it just happens that Heads sit on the right while Hearts sit on the left. The division is clear to see, with Heads wearing their usual blue and Hearts wearing reds. It isn't forced, but it certainly isn't discouraged.

Meanwhile, the graduating students occupy the first two rows, their faces gleaming with anticipation. They sit according to rank in class, so Clarke Griffin is in the first seat on the aisle. She, like the other students, is dressed in some of her finest, which for her means her crepe cornflower blouse and matching blue headband. She sits with a straight back, crossed ankles, and her hands overlapped in a way that displays the small Head tattoo on her left hand. When her mother used to tell stories of Clarke as a child, Abby would always say she knew Clarke was a natural Head even as a toddler. It was in the inquisitive way she looked at the world, the way she fixated on a problem and tried everything to solve it. Now, Clarke sits at the top of her class, the best among the best. She would graduate with honors, and she has been holding an apprenticeship at the clinic for almost two years, courtesy of her mother's recommendation. In nearly every way, Clarke Griffin is a glistening, pristine example of the system at its finest.

"And now," Jaha says, turning from the wider audience to directly address the students. "I invite our graduating students to join us and receive their ceremonial pin, in recognition of their accomplishments. Please proceed when we call your name."

Clarke straightens in her seat, smoothing down her flaxen hair and wiping her warm palms on her pant legs. She watches as the members of the council rise from their seats on the auditorium stage, now standing as Jaha is. Her own mother resides on the council, and it is Abby Griffin who pulls forward two identical silver bowls. Though Clarke cannot clearly see what is inside, the teachers have taught them enough about the ceremony to know that the bowls hold the graduation pins - one bowl for Heads, the other for Hearts.

Jaha moves downstage beside the table with the bowls, and one of the council-women - Clarke recalls her name is Anya Woods - takes to the polished podium to read the names. She smooths the paper before her, clears her throat then calls out.

"Clarke Griffin."

Clarke rises, exhaling in a slow, calming breath. She tries to quell the nervous flutters in her stomach, instead focusing on taking steady, measured footsteps up the stairs and across the stage. She catches her mother's glance from behind Jaha, where Abby stands and claps with tears in her eyes. Clarke's heart swells.

"Congratulations, Miss Griffin," Jaha says, shaking her hand in a firm but gentle grasp. There is a special warmth in his smile for her; Clarke has been close to the Jaha's for her entire life, especially close to Thelonious's son Wells. They are practically family. Clarke beams back at him and waits patiently as he clasps her new graduation pin onto the collar of her blouse.

"Thank you, sir." Clarke gives a quick nod, then crosses the stage and returns to her seat. Glancing at her collarbone, she admires her new pin: It is a polished silvery color and circular in shape, with the sign of the school on it, a "G" for graduate. The only slight difference between hers and a Heart's pin is the colored emblem in the middle. Hers is blue, and it is the same sign that all Heads have tattooed
below their left thumb: an arrow pointing upwards. Heart pins have a red emblem with their sign: a circle with a balanced cross inscribed inside.

It is a little while before any Hearts are called up to receive their pins, as naturally the Heads are the top of their class. Raven Reyes is the first Heart to be called, graduating seventh in rank. She strides up to the stage like she owns the world, a wide, glowing smile breaking across her face. There is plenty of cheering through the audience's polite applause, as Raven is popular and well-liked among her classmates. Octavia Blake, for instance, isn't afraid of cheering. She is seated in the second row, dressed in a maroon sleeveless top, and clapping enthusiastically. When Raven flashes her radiant smile in Octavia's direction, she can't help but cheerfully cry out, even if it earns her a few glares from other students. So what? Let them stare. Octavia isn't afraid of the extra attention.

She is used to attention. Since coming to Arkadia fourteen years ago, she's been under the scrutinizing eye of the Arkadia community. Refugees are welcomed into the city, but always received with wariness and hesitation, especially those old enough to have experienced the outside world. People are polite to the Blakes, but hardly friendly. Things had only become worse when her mother was killed in a freak accident, leaving Octavia and her older brother on their own. Soon, the attention shifted from wariness to pity. Luckily Octavia's brother was old enough to look out for his sister himself, allowing the siblings to stay together. They live on the outskirts of town, Bellamy always encouraging his sister to fly under the radar while Octavia would blatantly refuse. She likes to be recognized. Her beautiful appearance - pixie face, jade green eyes, long ebony hair - and explosive personality makes her hard to ignore and impossible to forget.

The boy next to Octavia tries to shush her, bumping her with his elbow and placing a finger to his lips. Octavia rolls her eyes. "Go float yourself, Del." She retorts under her breath.

She settles into the back of her seat, getting comfortable until she finally hears her name called. She knows exactly when it is coming, not because Del has just received his pin, but because she's been watching Anya. The reader pauses, swallows, then announces, "Octavia Blake." Perfect.

Octavia's lips pull up into a smirk as she crosses and climbs the stairs. Her reputation is preceding her, just the way she likes it. She's always been one to stir up trouble, just enough to get recognized but never enough to get caught. Little things: clever vandalization, petty theft, trespassing to have a good time. She sees no incentive to stop; ever since she'd started flying in the face of rules, people have come to like her more and more. She walks with her chin raised and eyes blazing, ready to challenge anyone in her way. If Jaha notices this confrontational body language as Octavia receives her pin, he doesn't show it.

"Congratulations, Miss Blake," he says to her, his voice tight and controlled. But something behind his eyes finally betrays him. A strange combination of hesitance and dominance and repulsion. Like he's facing the one problem he cannot solve. Octavia doesn't take her eyes off his face as long as he fastens the pin to her collar. She recalls that she's supposed to thank the Chancellor, so she pours some saccharine sweetness into her voice as she does.

"Walking off the stage, Octavia for the first time feels the weight of those hundreds of eyes in the auditorium. She turns, gaze settling on one pair in particular. He stands at the back of the seats, by the door he'd likely just slipped through. He's not in uniform, but he wears dark clothing that blends him into the hanging shadows. Even from afar, Octavia can see the most important features stand out: clapping hands, twinkling eyes, a proud smile. She'd been hoping Bellamy could get out of
work for her graduation. And here he is.

After the ceremony, Clarke stands underneath one of the scrawny trees in the school yard. The sky overhead is gray and overcast and the little sun that trickles through the clouds casts a filmy glow. Clarke watches the tide of parents and students rolling out from within the building, all full of excitement and relief. But not her mother, who had been lingering behind somewhere in the auditorium. Clarke's eyes scan for a familiar silhouette. She hears her mother before she sees her.

"Clarke?"

Clarke rushes into her embrace, grinning. "I'm so proud of you," Abby purrs into Clarke's ear, breaking the hug to get a better look at her new graduate. "You've worked so hard to get here, and you've earned it."

"Thanks Mom."

"How does it feel to be a graduate now?" Abby asks with sparkling eyes.

Clarke takes a moment to find the right word. "Important. Like every little decision, every little thing matters so much more now."

"Well luckily you don't have to worry about getting a job assignment, that's already taken care of. I spoke with Jackson and the rest of the clinic board, and they agree that we should begin increasing your hours and responsibilities regarding your apprenticeship. It'll ease you into full-time shifts at the clinic." Something shifts in Abby's face. "Speaking of…"

"What is it?"

"They buzzed me during the ceremony," Abby says sheepishly. "That gentleman with the heart condition, the one I was telling you about, he got worse over the afternoon. They moved up his surgery to just under the hour, and I need to work into the evening."

"Of course," Clarke nods, understanding the circumstances. "How long?"

"Six hours, maybe seven? Could be later." Abby takes hold of Clarke's shoulders. "I'm so sorry to leave you on your graduation night. I'll make it up somehow." She fumbles for ideas. "Maybe you could spend the evening at the Jaha's? I'm sure they'd love to have you."

"Actually, Wells and I had talked about going somewhere tonight, maybe with Raven. You know, to celebrate."

"Fantastic." Abby smiles, relief in her eyes that Clarke will not be entirely alone on her special night. Something buzzes, and she checks the white wristband on her arm, reading a small message in the screen. "Shoot, I don't want to be late."

"Go," Clarke tells her, hugging her mother for one last time. "I'll be fine. Really."
Octavia is leaning against the brick wall of the schoolbuilding when Atom sneaks up behind her. She doesn't see him coming, just feels his nose bump her jawline as he nestles into her shoulder.

"Atom!" She jumps, spinning right into his wandering hands. She giggles, feeling his grin against her skin. "Stop, Atom, Bellamy's here."

"I don't see your brother anywhere." He has a point. Octavia hasn't seen him since leaving the auditorium, but she knows Bellamy is around.

"He's somewhere. And you know he wouldn't approve of any of this."

Atom pulls back, pouting. "So, what, we keep this a secret forever? We're graduates now, Octavia. Adults."

"I'm still living with Bellamy, and as long as I am, I have to keep him somewhat happy." She folds her arms, looking him up and down. Atom is easy on the eyes, no stunner but she certainly isn't complaining. They aren't exclusive, but their relationship - if it could be defined as that - is playful and wild. Octavia isn't looking to be tied down anytime soon.

Atom digs his hands into his pockets like a little schoolboy. "Murphy and Mbege and I were talking, and we had an idea."

"What kind of idea?"

"One you'd like." His eyes are sly and excited. "How'd you like to get a tattoo?"

Octavia's brow furrows. "Tattoo like this tattoo?" She points to the mark on her hand, but Atom shakes his head.

"It could be whatever kind you want. A symbol, a name, a picture, whatever you'd like."

"They don't do that, Atom. Tattoos are for classification, they're…" Octavia's voice drifts off, reading the look on Atom's face. "What are you thinking?"

"Remember Trina? Well, turns out she's assigned to facilities over in the classification center. Her keycard gets her into the wing where they store the tattoo supplies, and her friend Pascal is one of the tattoo printers."

"Are you serious?" Octavia's face blossoms into a smile, throwing her arms around Atom's shoulders. "Let's do it."

"Great. Mbege and Murphy are going to meet us behind the classification center in half an hour, so we've got to move."

Octavia nods, and she finally spots her brother's familiar figure across the courtyard. She watches his eyes narrow and chin raise as he takes in Atom and his close proximity to his baby sister. Octavia knows that's Atom's cue to leave. She gently pushes his shoulder, whispering, "I'll meet you there. Half an hour."

As Atom slips around the corner, Octavia adjusts the bottom of her top and crosses to Bellamy, a sweet genuine smile on her face. "You came, Bell."

"Of course I did," He sweeps her into an embrace, and she relaxes in the warmth of his arms. Octavia's memories of her mother are limited and fading fast, but Bellamy has always been her constant. Her home.
"How'd you get out of your shift? You said your boss is a dick, that he wouldn't let you."

Bellamy shrugs. "He's still a dick, but I stretched the truth to make it a surprise for you. Thought we could do something to celebrate." His hooded eyes flicker in the direction where Atom disappeared. "Though something tells me that's not going to happen tonight."

Octavia sighs. "It's a group of us, Bell. We wanted to do something special, you know."

"A group?"

"Yeah," Octavia tries to downplay it. "Atom, Murphy, Mbege, a whole bunch of us."

Bellamy's eyebrows rise. It's times like these that he feels so much more like a parent than a brother. He is only three years older than Octavia, but circumstances forced him to grow up quickly. He folds his arms. "Can I trust you to stay out of trouble?"

"Probably not."

"O…" His voice is a cautionary grumble. To a stranger, he must look intimidating, with his inky curls hanging shadows over his eyes. But this is her brother, and she can't help but laugh a little.

"What? I'm just being honest." They start off through the courtyard, matching their steps on the gravel. "How about this: I'll try to stay out of trouble. Seriously, Bell, we just want to have a little fun, you know?" That isn't the right way to phrase it, as Bellamy's eyes widen. "Not that kind of fun. I'm not stupid."

"You don't always make the best of choices."

"Neither of us do," Octavia says. Her internal clock reminds her that she won't have a lot of time to make it to the classification center in time. "I'll be careful. And I'll be back by curfew."

"Fine. Just don't do anything to get yourself in trouble, okay?"

Octavia chooses not to answer, giving Bellamy a brief hug instead. "Catch up to you later," she says with a grin, turning down the street with a little spring in her step.

"Where are you leading us?"

"You'll see soon enough." Wells tosses it back over his shoulder, where Clarke follows close behind. They travel in a little cluster: Wells leading, then Clarke, Raven, and Finn. Clarke wasn't expecting Finn to join them, and something about it makes her a little uneasy. She knows how, even though he's been spoken for by Raven, Finn still thinks of Clarke too fondly for a friend. It is an infatuation that Clarke frankly finds silly. Raven is one of Clarke's closest friends. She won't jeopardize that, not even for someone as charismatic and charming as Finn. And besides, Finn is a Heart. Romantic relationships between Heads and Hearts never happen.

Clarke remembers asking her mother about that, as a child. She recalls watching a couple walking down the street, hand in hand. They were both dressed with red, so Clarke assumed they were both hearts.

"Mommy," she asked. "What happens if a Head and a Heart got married?"
"That's a funny question. What made you think of that?"

"I was just curious. Could they fall in love?"

Here, Abby paused. Looking back, Clarke still cannot determine if her mother was choosing her words carefully, or if she really couldn't find an answer. "Well, the system shows us that both Heads and Hearts are important to keeping balance, but they're very different. I think a Head and a Heart could definitely respect each other, or be friends. But love takes understanding. I don't know if they could do that."

Clarke can see where her mother was coming from, especially considering the seat Abby's been holding on the council for over ten years. But her father, while he was still alive, tried to take a slightly-different approach. Clarke remembers the way he used to speak about the division as if it wasn't as important as everyone else made it out to be. Somedays, it was just about a wardrobe of red or blues and a tattoo on a hand. Other days, he almost made it sound like he thought the system was a nuisance. But those talks were infrequent and never lasted long.

Clarke can't seem to shake off her father's opinions. After all, the division cannot really be that bad. It makes some things complicated, like job sorting and romantic relationships. But it gives everyone a place in Arkadia, where they can be productive and useful. They have a built-in community of people who understand them, and work that is compatible to their personalities. Clarke has heard this reasoning a hundred times, and yet, since her father left, it is as though there is some small part of her that remains unconvinced. Like a little seed of doubt grows within her, and she just can't seem to stomp it out yet.

They leave behind the familiar school courtyard, traveling along the sidewalk past rows of nearly identical houses, all sleet gray and minimalist in design. It's one of the nicer areas of town. The lawns are well-kept and exteriors flawless, like those old photos of pre-war suburbs. It's Arkadia's great imitation of normalcy. They pass neighborhoods and make their way towards the city center, the pathways becoming more crowded with people returning home for the evening. Overhead, the sun hangs low in the sky. Wells weaves them throw the tide of pedestrians, sticking to the edges and trying to avoid stopping for anyone he recognizes.

"Any idea where we're going?" Clarke asks Raven, who falls into step beside her.

"No clue." Raven's cheeks are flushed and she hurries to keep up the pace. Her bum leg - nerve damage that she's faced since birth - makes it difficult for her. Clarke notices it in the tiny details: how Raven's fingers clench unconsciously into a fist with painful steps, how her breath is quick and she bites the inside of her lip. But naturally, Raven will never admit it. Clarke's known Raven for years, and she's never once hear Raven admit that her leg slows her down or makes things difficult. She just keeps a smile on her face and burns a fire in her eyes. And even with a bad leg, Raven Reyes - with her signature red jacket and feisty attitude - carries herself like the world is hers for the taking.

City Center hums with late-afternoon energy. It's a wide courtyard with the most important buildings around it in a ring. At the far end is the administrative center. It looms over the others, with its impressive white marble columns and pre-war architecture. Two rows of little shops frame the Center, open for business for those people with enough credits to spend on luxury. The square is filled with people, milling about in conversation or on their way home. Clarke and the others stay on the edges, trying to be discrete, and she keeps her gaze down on the inscribed stone border around the square: The words are Arkadia's motto: *In honorem heri cras aedificare domum*, "In honor of yesterday, we build a home for tomorrow".

They leave behind the square, and as they do, Clarke can't help but pass a glance at the job
distribution building. It's short and brick and practical, exactly as you'd expect such a building to be, and tomorrow it will have a line of eager graduates extending out the door. Luckily for Clarke, she already has her apprenticeship at the clinic. But others - like Raven, who notices the building too - will have to play the odds.

"Maybe I should try to be first in line tomorrow." Raven says.

Clarke looks at her skeptically. "You'd have to be up at dawn, and I know you're not a morning person."

"Yeah, but it'd be worth it in the long run. And I heard someone say that all the good jobs go early."

"I don't think that's how it works." Clarke says, an uncomfortable feeling settling in between them. Because they both recognize that unspoken truth: It doesn't matter how early you go to get in line. The good jobs tend to go to Heads.

"I mean, I'm not looking for anything crazy, like engineer or something. Just an entry-level job, and something... good. Interesting. Something I can use my brain for, maybe."

"Isn't that what the Heads are for?" Finn mutters under his breath. It's loud enough for Clarke to hear, and she's certain that Raven is trying to ignore it.

"Hey," Clarke says reassuringly. "I'm sure something good will come along."

"Easy for you to say," Raven teases. "You've been working at the clinic for years now. You have a job."

"Apprenticeship." Clarke reddens as she corrects Raven, wanting the subject to change. Wells leads them through the section of Arkadia known as the "warehouse district". Instead of identical houses or little storefronts, this side is full of long, boring-looking buildings with generic signs painted onto the walls. Off in the distance are the farmlands, recognizable for their wide fields and weathered barns. The only activity here comes from the few trucks pulling out of their parking lots, making for a quiet walk. They reach the edge of the forest in no time.

Trees fade in gradually, the ground underfoot changing from asphalt to gravel to scrub undergrowth. "The forest?" Clarke asks.

Wells nods. "Keep up." He pushes a branch out of their path, veering left and never looking back to see if they're still following.

"Slow down a little, I haven't been out here since..." Clarke pauses to think, a memory dawning on her. "Wait, Wells. Are we going to the climbing trees?"

He turns around, a warm smile on his face. "Alright, you guessed it."

"What climbing trees?" Raven asks.

"When we were younger, Wells and I used to play on these big trees. We'd sneak away from our parents and come out here. They had these trees with all these low, wide branches, and if you climbed to the top the view was amazing." She feels the nostalgia swell in her chest. "We couldn't have been much older than eight or nine."

"It's been a long time." He adds. "I thought it'd be fun to revisit, not just for old time's sake, but if we climb high enough, we should be able to see over the wall."
Clarke hears Finn stop. "Over the wall?"

Wells shushes him. "Lower your voice. And yeah, over the wall."


They meet behind the classification center, between one of the large dumpsters and a furnace. Octavia rounds the corner, arms folded and trying to look nonchalant while her nerves are dancing. She calms down a little when she sees Atom. He is joined by the two Johns, each called by their last name: Murphy and Mbege.

"Octavia Blake." Her name lazily rolls off his tongue. John Murphy is a slick creature, with hooded wide-set eyes and a hooked nose. He appraises Octavia as she approaches the group, and – from the look on his face – he likes what he's seeing. "Nice of you to join us."

"Simmer down Murphy," Octavia says, unamused. She gives a quick nod to Mbege, who wisely keeps quiet, then turns to Atom. "Who are we waiting for?"

"We were waiting for you, but now it's just Trina." He motions to an unlabeled gray door. "She'll unlock it and get us inside, and Pascal can get us into the room with the tattoo printers."

"Awesome," Octavia grins. She tugs down the hood of her jacket. "Just curious: Why'd they agree to help you?"

Atom shrugs. "Trina owes me a favor." He lowers his voice, not keen on having the Johns listen in. "She gets really bad migraines, but with her job and family issues she doesn't have enough credits for the painkillers she needs. She's tried the alternative herbal stuff, but it doesn't work the same."

"So how does this involve you?"

"You know I work in transportation. Well, one day one of my shipments just happened to have an entire case of the high-tolerance painkillers, the ones she really needed. My partner was running late, so when I was alone I cracked open the canisters and took out half of the pills in several of the bottles. The stash won't last forever, but it'll last a while so long as she doesn't waste them."

"Atom, if they found out it was you, you could be arrested. And with painkillers involved…"

"It was a few weeks ago," he admits. "If they knew it was me, they would've caught me by now. I think I'm in the clear."

A loud sound interrupts their careful quiet, as the door swings open. A girl appears in the doorway, with a long brown braid over her shoulder and shifting eyes. She carries a stack of clipboards and folders. "Quickly," she says, keeping her voice low and ushering them forward. Atom approaches first, Octavia following close behind.

Inside, the hallway is halfway lit, the fluorescent lights overhead dimmed and painting the interior with a slight greenish tinge. Immediately Octavia looks up, scanning the ceiling for any surveillance cameras. She's only been in the hall for a handful of seconds and she already feels like she's being watched.
"Don't worry," Trina assures them. "They can't see us right now."

"No cameras?" Mbege asks to check.

"Not back here. It'd be a waste to have them. No one wants to watch us take out the trash." She leads them further down the hall, everyone careful to keep their footsteps light and quiet. Octavia – like most people in Arkadia – has been in the classification center just once before: to take the sorting test that labeled her a Heart. She'd been a child when she took it, just five years old, the standard testing age. All she remembers of the place was a small, empty room with a table in the center, and funny questions on the tablet they provided her with. Afterwards, she can recall getting escorted to another room to receive her tattoo.

To this day, Octavia has never once doubted that she is entirely a Heart. In her mind, the sorting couldn't be more accurate. When she thinks of Heads, she thinks of those know-it-all brains from school: like that quiet and calculating Lexa Woods, or Clarke Griffin, the perfect poster child for Heads. That's not her. That's never been her.

A young man approaches them, with short dark curls and a dusting of a goatee. Octavia's blood runs cold, until she notices the ease with which Trina receives him. She introduces the man as Pascal and Octavia can relax.

Trina stops them at a corner, distributing the items she's been carrying. She hands Octavia a clipboard. "There's a camera up ahead. Keep your head down and walk at a normal, even pace. We'll stagger and go in pairs. Keep this in your hands and you might be able to pass for a worker from a distance."

Octavia's not sure if she can put her faith in Trina's plan, but there's really no other option. Trina directs the Johns to go first, Atom trailing just behind. Then she moves with Octavia at her side. Glancing from the corner of her eye, Octavia notices the camera: a little black bulb on the ceiling, shiny and reflective. They pass through with silence, and Octavia releases her breath when they round the next corner and there's no nearby camera.

"This way." Trina leads them down a smaller hallway labeled Maintenance. Here, they move quickly, the only sounds coming from their footsteps and some distant machine hum. They reach an unmarked door and Trina extracts her passcard, swiping it through the scanner.

Atom furrows his brow. "Won't they know you've been in here, if you've scanned your passcard?"

"Yeah, but I've been in here before for odd errands. They shouldn't think anything of it."

"And if they do? It'll come down on your head."

Trina shrugs like it's nothing. "I'll be careful. Now get inside, all of you."

Clarke hurries along behind Wells, her eyes scouring the landscape for the familiar childhood landmarks. As day slips into twilight, the lazy sunlight seeps through the foliage overhead in slices, painting the forest with patches of yellow light. From behind her, she hears Raven trip over a branch and swear.

"Careful," Clarke admonishes her with a laugh. "We're going to need to be very quiet, the wall isn't
that far now.” On her right, she catches it: the mangled stump of a fallen tree. It is peppered with moss and decay, and Clarke knows she's found the correct one. "Here," she says, nudging Wells and stepping off the fading path. "Go right."

He nods in recognition. "Do you remember when we tried to build a fortress out here? We lashed together branches with twine you stole from your dad's workroom."

"You got a splinter on your finger, a really bad one, and it took me half an hour and three different tools to get it out."

"What seven-year-old even knows how to remove a splinter?"

"I did," Clarke says proudly. They lead the group to a slight left at a recognizable knot on a tree, then watch their forest landscape shift. Underfoot, the ground begins to slope upwards, almost unnoticeably at first. Then, straight ahead, Clarke sees the swooping branches of the climbing trees. They are enormous and leafy, and the trunks still look thick and sturdy enough to support the weight of several anxious teenagers. Clarke grins, hit with nostalgia. She pauses for just a moment, listening for any sounds they should be concerned about. When all that answers is the forest quiet, she nods and walks forward to grab a branch.

Clarke never had good climbing hands. Even as children, Wells's were better; they were bigger and better for strong grips. Clarke has smaller hands with long, narrow fingers. Hands that can sew the tiniest of sutures, or handle a scalpel with caution and preciseness. Careful, medical hands. But she likes the feeling of rough wood against her palm as she climbs, the sensation of calluses forming in new places. She is methodical with her climbing, always testing the foothold before placing her weight on it, visually measuring each branch against her weight. Before she pauses to catch her breath, she is at least twenty feet up in the air. She settles at the base of a wide branch, knowing that she probably shouldn't go much higher. Leaning against the trunk, she is thankful for her blue blouse; in the fading light, she can blend right into the shadows among the branches.

The others follow up in suit, Wells moving quickly and deftly. Finn and Raven take their time; Raven moving as quickly as her leg will allow her, and Finn waiting patiently for her out of courtesy. They don't make it nearly as high, but Raven's face shines with sweat from the exertion of making it halfway up, so they linger lower.

"Look." Wells says, pointing out past the trees. "West." Through the leaves, Clarke catches pieces of a pink sky, glowing red where the sun sets over distant hills. The landscape is indistinct, but it is clear that it's past the fence. In fact, as Clarke lowers her gaze, she can make out the concrete wall and barbed wire. The wall is that magical part of Arkadia that everyone knows of but very few ever get to see. Even getting this close to the wall - practically a few paces away - is treated as a crime. A sting of fear settles in her stomach, so Clarke focuses on the sunset instead.

The world beyond the wall is a mystery to almost everyone in Arkadia. Especially Arkborns like Clarke – people who were born and lived their entire lives inside the walls. Nearly all of Clarke's friends are Arkborns, since refugees are more uncommon than one would expect. But every so often, some innocents from the outside stumble upon Arkadia and, if they're earnest and their intentions are harmless, they're accepted in. There's a long process of classification and identification, as it's always more difficult to assimilate outsiders into Arkadia's system than raise Arkborns under its influence. And then there's the undeniable stigma around refugees, even years after they've lived in Arkadia. Clarke thinks of Octavia Blake. Some let the stigma get to them, others spit it right back in the system's face.

Her eyes drift closed, not looking for sleep but relishing in the rest. Her breath is slow, listening to the hiss of the wind through leaves. She cannot tell how long has passed - it feels like seconds, or
days - when Raven whispers her name.

"Clarke, I think something's down there."

She whips around, following where Raven points at the ground. Her breath clenches in her throat, but she cannot see. Shifting her weight, Clarke grips the branch she sits on and begins to inch along it.

"What are you doing?" Wells whispers, but Clarke ignores him. She moves slowly, climbing out just far enough to see the ground. Instead, she sees the concrete base of the wall. And more importantly, four shiny letters in blood-red paint.

KANE

Clarke's insides turn cold. It is a word reserved for the shadows, a name no one will admit to knowing while everyone does. A cover-up gone wrong. Clarke's been hearing stories about Kane since she was a child, and even now she has no way of separating myth from reality. Some say Kane was a monster of a man, others say he was quiet and withdrawn. Either way, he publicly denounced the sorting system, a thousand stories telling it in a thousand different ways, and somehow made it past the wall. He fled into the wilderness, and his name remains as an example of escape. Naturally, the council did everything in its power to squash the legend of Kane. It's one of the many unspoken rules of Arkadia: *never* mention Kane in public.

Even from a distance, Clarke can tell that the paint is fresh from the way it drips. The letters must be almost as tall as herself. But the "A" in particular is fascinating: it's no ordinary "A". Instead, some extra lines are added so, as Clarke stares at it, she can see both symbols for Heads and Hearts inscribed inside. It's artistic, almost.

Then she hears the dreadful sound of running footsteps. Eyes wide, Clarke watches in horror as a trio of guards race to the wall, their black uniforms unmistakable. She turns to her friends, not knowing what to do. Their faces mirror her own, and so they stay frozen up in the trees.

The guards speak quickly and without any concern for volume, so Clarke catches snippets of their conversation. She listens as one man radios in, reporting "highly-malicious vandalization" along the border. Another guard drags his finger through the paint, feeling it's only partially dried. They examine the surrounding undergrowth for clues, and Clarke doesn't breathe as she sits suspended twenty feet above them.

Just when she thinks it's over, just when she knows they'll be found out, the radio emits a loud blur of static. Clarke nearly jumps right off the branch in surprise. The guard answers it gruffly. "What is it?"

The chatter coming through the radio is broken and difficult to hear from where Clarke sits. Instead, she watches a change come over the guard's face, and he nods. "Yes, sir." Once he clicks off the call, the guard swears and calls out to his companions. They disappear along the wall in the southern direction.

After three more minutes of silence, Clarke finally moves. Her joints ache from holding the tension, and she inches back along the branch.

"We should get out of here," Raven pants.

"Exactly," Wells agrees. "They'll be back as soon as they sweep that other area."

"Why did they leave?" Finn's brow furrows.
Clarke still feels something cold running inside her. "We need to go." She waits for Raven, on the lowest branch, to start her descent, then follows Finn and Wells. As soon as her feet touch solid ground, she takes off running.

Octavia isn't sure what to expect on the other side of the door, which leads her to a small dark room. Pascal flips a switch on the wall, turning on the bright overhead lights. There are glossy metal tables and three fancy chairs, the kind Octavia remembers seeing in the clinic a long time ago. The walls are covered with shelving and drawers, all dark steel with small neat labels. When they walk, the tiles on the floor make fill the room with too much noise.

But then Pascal opens a drawer and starts pulling out long black tools with wires and needles. And suddenly, all Octavia can think about is what her tattoo should be.

"Shit, man," Murphy says with a wide smile as he looks at Pascal. "We're really doing this."

Trina passes a slim notepad to Octavia with a pen. "Draw what you want, and Pascal will do his best to replicate it."

Pascal nods. "I'm no artist, but I'm not bad."

Octavia drops onto one of the chairs and begins to sketch. She tries a whole variety of designs – her initials, her mother's name, little sketches of the moon or a butterfly. But she certainly isn't an artist, and nothing seems to do justice. She becomes distracted, however, when Mbege sits for the first tattoo.

Glancing over Pascal's shoulder, she sees the sketch: It's a line of flames, angry and jagged. *Appropriate*, she deems. Mbege's always been the guy to play with fire, even as a child. He's practically a full-blown arsonist. He sits backwards in the chair, facing the back of the seat. Pascal tugs down the top of his jacket's collar, the top of his back exposed. "Here?" Mbege nods yes.

Pascal aligns his foot over a floor pedal, then presses down and the machine whirs to life. Holding the needle apparatus in his hand, he adjusts a few controls before inking the first line into Mbege's skin. Octavia watches the solid dark line appear across his back, then another line. They join, forming the peaks of the sketched flames. Her blood pulses behind her ears, nerves jumping and sparking. And even though, for the life of her, she can't decide what her tattoo should be, she couldn't be more excited.

Pascale gets halfway through the fourth peak when the power cuts out.

It's not all at once. First the tattoo machine goes, the humming going silent. Pascal swears loudly as he stomps on the pedal, but then the lights flicker and shut off. Octavia freezes.

There's a fumbling sound, then Trina flicks on a small flashlight stolen from one of the drawers. She points it at the door as Atom runs to the panel. He jams his finger repeatedly on the "open" button, but the door won't budge. "They know we're here."

In the thin silvery light, Octavia notices a label reading "miscellaneous tools" on the wall. Fingers flying, she yanks open the drawer and rummages through. She settles on a sturdy iron bar, like some variant of a crowbar. *This should do.* "Here," she says, rushing to the door and shoving the end of the bar at the crack along the door's edge. Octavia leans with all of her weight, but the door is stuck.
"Move." Murphy hisses at her, elbowing her out of the way as he grabs the bar from her fingers. With a grunt, he pushes until the door screams, a sharp scraping sound as it breaks past its lock and slides open.

"Go!" Atom yells, and they spill out into the hallway. Octavia yanks her hood back up, stumbling over her feet as she follows Murphy around the corner. She wants to turn around to check on Atom, but she hears a different set of clomping footsteps racing from the other end of the hall, echoing off the walls. Security guards.

She risks a glance, spinning over her shoulder to see no one behind her but the growing shadows of the guards. Ice settles in her chest, desperately hoping Atom's found another route of escape. Distracted, she trips over her steps and lands face down onto the floor. Her head throbs and she struggles to catch the breath that's been knocked out of her. But she can feel the footsteps pounding on the floor beneath her cheek, so she forces herself up and moving again.

"Stop!" A deep voice barks out from behind her, but Octavia keeps running. She can hear the guards a dozen paces behind her. Trying to buy time, her eyes catch a rolling cart off to one wall, and she drags it into the center of the path behind her, knocking it over to barricade the hallway.

It doesn't slow them down for long. Just as Octavia sees her escape – the frosted glass of a window up ahead – she hears the first gunshot.

The bullet bursts past her ear, a dart of air and sound. She flinches. She hears the second crack but doesn't feel the wind of this one. Instead, her shoulder erupts. It's like a fire, scalding the back of the arm. She cries out, but the window is just a few steps ahead. Skidding to a halt, Octavia thrusts the heel of her boot into the glass with all she can muster, hearing the satisfying sound of the windowpane shattering. Without a second glance back, she throws herself through the window, tumbling out in a mess of glass shards and dropping onto the asphalt. Her eyes sting, and she doesn't even know why. She doesn't bother to open them, just jumps to her feet and runs, runs until her legs cry and her ears stop ringing.

...\n
And that's just chapter one.

Similarly to what I did with *Kingdom Come*, I'll be pulling inspiration and classic cliches from other dystopian novels, some of which you might already be seeing ;) I'm looking forward to weaving it altogether into something very new.

(Also, I have the entirety of this story mapped out and ready to be written, so yay for prewriting and organization!)

If you've liked what you've read, I'd love to hear about it. Or even if you didn't, or you're just waiting for me to get to it... hit up those reviews!

Stay tuned,

-K.T. Grace
Stupid Words

Sometimes I hate every single stupid word you say

Sometimes I wanna slap you in your whole face

There's no one quite like you

You push all my buttons down

I know life would suck without you

-P!nk, “True Love”

Bellamy’s heavy boots trudge along the gravel path, weighed down with exhaustion from a busy day. He tried not to let it show at Octavia’s graduation, but as soon as he reached the food warehouse, he began to sink. Now, walking home with a too-empty bag of rations, all he wants is a good night of sleep.

But Octavia is out, so his mind stands on alert. He wants to believe that she’ll be smart and stay out of trouble, but this is Octavia. “No” is never quite enough with her. Plus, he notices as he walks the familiar route home, it’s getting dark. And it is a slippery slope from nightfall to curfew, when things would become even more complicated.

He doesn’t even make it to his street when he recognizes her silhouette. It’s that blood instinct; he knows it’s his sister right away. But something isn’t right. She stands in the shadows by a grove of tall bushes, hood up and shoulders hunched. Her eyes are wild. Bellamy hurries to her.

“O, what’s wrong?”

She doesn’t see him coming until he speaks, which surprises her. “Bellamy! I was looking for you, I needed to find you.” Her voice wavers with emotion.

“What is it?” As he comes closer, he notices more about her. He notices the littering of red scratches on her face, the tangles in her hair. He instinctively grabs for her shoulders to get a better look at her, but she cries out. His blood runs cold. Bellamy can feel the sticky warmth under his fingers, and he pulls back. “You’re hurt.”

“My shoulder…”

“What happened to you?” His mind is racing. “I thought you were going to be careful.”

“I thought I was too.” Octavia speaks just above a whisper, and Bellamy’s grateful they’re halfway hidden inside the bushes off a silent street. “I thought I could outrun them, I’m fast--- But they started shooting and I didn’t think about guns---”
“You got shot?” He looks at her shoulder again, and there’s no mistaking the thick dark stain.

“Bell, I don’t know what to do.”

“What the hell were you doing?”

“We were at the classification center, this girl Atom knew was able to sneak us in. We were getting tattoos.”

“Tattoos?” It takes nearly all the control he has to keep his voice low and careful. He feels like screaming. Not necessarily at Octavia, but just screaming.

“And we thought we were fine, we were so careful--- but then they cut the power and sent security guards after us--- I don’t even know if the others got away!”

Bellamy couldn’t care less about any of the others, not while his little sister is bleeding from a bullet to her shoulder. And then all sorts of worries settle into his mind: What if they got Octavia’s face on some security footage? What would they do to her for trespassing? He needs to get her off the street. “Come on, we need to go home.”

“But my shoulder…”

“Is bleeding and torn to pieces. I’ll be able to take a better look at it under some light.”

“Bell, you’re not a doctor.” These are the first words she speaks with conviction in a while.

“Well, we don’t really have a lot of options here, O.”

“You can’t just slap a bandage over a bullet wound. I need that bullet out.”

“It’s not like I can take you to the clinic!” He can’t keep the frustration and panic completely out of his voice, and certainly not forever. “There’s only one place bullets come from, they’ll know you’ve been shot by a guard and I’m practically handing you over.”

“There’s got to be some other way. Someone else.”

“No one’s going to help if they think guards might be coming after you!”

“Clarke.” Octavia’s voice is quiet and hesitant. “Clarke Griffin.”

“Absolutely not.”

“She’s one of Raven’s friends. I trust Raven.”

“She’s a Griffin. Her mother holds a seat on the council, what part of that makes it a good idea?”

“Clarke’s been working at the clinic since she was, like, nine or something. She’s the smartest kid in my grade, she knows what she’s doing.”

“We can’t trust her,” Bellamy insists.

Octavia narrows her eyes. “I trust Raven’s judgment.”

“With your life?” This gives Octavia pause. “Because if she turns you in, who knows what will happen to you. I can’t live with that, O.”
She grits her teeth in pain. “I’ve got to get this bullet out. It’s either Clarke or the clinic.”

Bellamy feels the seconds pass in slow motion, turning over each option in his brain. It is a difficult choice, but in the end, it’s not really a choice at all. The clinic would mean losing Octavia no matter what. Perhaps Clarke could show mercy.

“Fine.” Gripping Octavia’s non-injured shoulder, he steers her out of the bushes and they move quickly down the path.

“Do you even know where she lives?” Octavia asks.

“Just look for the nicest street with the fanciest houses in the whole goddamn town,” he grumbles under his breath. “I’m sure she’ll be there.”

“Stay inside tonight. Just in case.” Wells warns Clarke as he stands at the edge of her lawn.

She nods. “You too.” She crosses up to the front step, watching Wells disappear down the street where he lives a few doors down. Finn and Raven are neighbors in another part of town, so everyone traveled home in pairs. Heartbeat still loud and racing, Clarke presses her finger to the scanner panel beside the front door, hearing the bolt become unlatched before sliding open the door.

The lights inside are all dimmed, meaning her mother isn’t home yet. Good. Clarke turns on the first lamp she can reach, feeling calmer in the light than shadowy darkness. She stands in the middle of her sterile living room, with its squeaky polyester sofa and standard-issue gray carpet underfoot. Little decorations, like candles or glass figurines bought from City Center, stand on the mantle over an unlit fireplace. It’s too neat and undisturbed. Practically unlived in.

On her way into the kitchen, Clarke catches her reflection in the hallway mirror, taking a second glance after being surprised by the first. Her cheeks are ruddy and flushed, with tendrils of her golden curls spilling out of all side of her headband. Her light blue eyes are wide and alert, as if afraid some determined border guard will come barreling through her front door at any minute. She takes a deep breath and smooths her hair, trying to pull herself together.

So what? She tells herself. So what if they you were at the border? Even if they did see you, you weren’t doing anything.

Of course, even if Clarke did get caught at the border, Clarke knows she probably wouldn’t have been punished all that harshly. Her mother would get our out on a warning. As much as Clarke hates to recognize her special treatment, it was a comforting thought.

Feeling her stomach grumble, Clarke realizes she hasn’t eaten dinner. The kitchen is just as generic and impersonal as the rest of the décor, save for Clarke’s childhood drawings, still hanging on the wall since Abby couldn’t find the strength to take down. It’d been Clarke’s father who’d hung them up years ago. Wiping her fidgety hands on her pants, Clarke slides the refrigerator door open, grabbing a small gray box and placing it in the flash oven. On lonely nights like these, Clarke doesn’t mind eating ration dinners, they’re convenient and she’s a lousy cook. When the oven beeps, Clarke returns to her kitchen chair and starts digging into her chicken and carrots.

Before she realizes what she’s doing, Clarke is playing with her graduate pin in the palm of her hand. She turns it over, liking the way the polished metal gleams under the light, how the blue arrow emblem glistens. And suddenly, it’s like she’s holding her entire future in the palm of her hand. Clarke sets down her fork and stops chewing.
She reminds herself that it’s normal to be nervous, even though she has no real reason to be. It’s not like anything will really be that different, not at first. Clarke will go on with her apprenticeship, go on living at home until she turns nineteen. Then, she’ll be able to move into one of the single clusters, living on her own until she settles down with someone. She’ll work her way up the hospital system, and with her background she’ll probably be a supervising doctor by the time she’s thirty. Everything is planned and nicely laid out, as straightforward as the arrow on her pin.

But what, she allows herself to wonder, if it wasn’t? What if her future wasn’t so preordained and organized? Sitting there, alone in her kitchen, heart still racing from her dash from the wall, it feels like a dangerous thought. Reckless, almost rebellious.

There’s a knock at the door.

Clarke freezes, the hair on the back of her neck standing on end. It’s not the polite knocking she’s used to from neighbors and her mother’s friends. It sounds urgent and forceful, like the door is only in the way. There it goes again. Clarke slowly rises from her seat, stomach rolling. Fingers acting of their own accord, they grab a pair of scissors from the countertop and slip them into her pocket. Just in case.

The hallway seems to stretch out before her and grow longer. More knocking. Clarke takes a deep breath before pressing on the door panel and sliding it open a crack.

She expects to see the black uniform of a border guard, or perhaps someone sent directly from the council. Clarke doesn’t expect to see Octavia Blake.

“Octavia?” She opens the door all the way, revealing Octavia’s hunched figure and, standing just behind, her older brother Bellamy. This gives Clarke pause. While she’s grown up alongside Octavia, there is something about Bellamy that’s always made her wary. She’s heard the rumors and gossip about him, and they’re not always flattering. Bellamy Blake, to say the least, is often described as intense. Seeing him on her front step, staring her down, she can understand why.

“Is your mom home?” Octavia asks, her shaky voice making her sound much younger than she really is.

“No.” Clarke shakes her head. “Is everything okay?”

Octavia hesitates, stealing a look backwards at her brother. Bellamy drags his glare off Clarke long enough to glance at Octavia. “Can I… we… come inside?”

A part of Clarke wants to say no, but there’s desperation in Octavia’s face. “Yeah, sure.” She lets them in and shuts the door behind them, noticing the stiff way Octavia moves. “What is it?”

“I hurt my shoulder.” Octavia speaks through gritted teeth. “I was hoping you could help me.”

“Me?” Clarke blinks, then leans in closer. “Let me take a look.” She gently prods the tender skin around Octavia’s shoulder, feeling sticky blood coat her fingertips. “Why didn’t you go to the clinic?”

Silence. Then, “I got shot.”

Clarke pauses, reading Octavia’s face. She’s absolutely serious. So is her brother, who is never more than an arm’s length away from Octavia. “I see.” No wonder they didn’t go to the clinic. “Give me a moment to gather my things.”

Clarke hurries to the hallway closet, grabbing for a dark blanket to cover the couch with. She feels a
firm hand grip her arm and she whips around. Bellamy stands inches from her face, a shadow falling across his eyes. Without even thinking, Clarke’s hand rests on the scissors in her pocket.

“Octavia needs your discretion, and your silence.” He whispers in a low growl, and she can feel his breath. “You need to swear that you won’t tell anyone that we’ve been here, or what happened. For Octavia.”

“Let go of me, Bellamy.” She hisses.

“Do I have your word?”

“Of course. Doctor’s confidentiality. Now get out of my way.” His grip slackens but he doesn’t move, gaze turned downwards at the scissors in her hands.

“Really?”

“I didn’t know who was showing up at my doorstep. Forgive me,” she scoffs.

“Who are you hiding from, princess?” There’s almost a taunt in his voice.

“None of your damn business.” She pushes him with an open palm, moving past him and grabbing her mother’s med-kit from underneath the bathroom sink. Clarke joins Octavia in the living room, where the injured girl awkwardly stands among the pristine furniture. Not wanting to leave behind any incriminating stains, Clarke lays the blanket over the sofa and ushers Octavia onto it.

“Let me get a better look at your shoulder,” she coaxes, slowly removing Octavia’s jacket. The sleeve slides off with a sticky, slick sound. Underneath, her arm is angry and painted in red. Clarke is aware of Bellamy hovering behind her. “Grab a bowl from the kitchen,” she directs him. “Fill it with water. Not too warm, not too cold.”

“You talking to me?” he asks.

“Yes, you. Quit pretending like you’ve never heard of a bowl before and go get one.” Bellamy leaves, and a smile breaks across Octavia’s cracked lips.

“Never knew you to have an attitude, Clarke. It’s refreshing.”

Clarke isn’t sure how to take that, so she just smiles and focuses on the arm again. She can see where the bullet lodged itself into the muscle, and it doesn’t look too deep. No complications with the bone or any ligaments. It should be a relatively straightforward extraction. When Bellamy returns with water, she dabs a clean washcloth into the bowl and begins sponging the blood off Octavia’s skin.

“Am I allowed to ask how this happened?” She directs this more at Bellamy than Octavia.

“The less you know, probably the better.” He answers gruffly, still hovering.

“Do I need to be worried about anyone coming for you, Octavia?”

She looks sheepish. “Hopefully not. Some friends and I snuck into the classification center… and then we got caught. I ran for it and that’s when I got shot.”

“Classification center? What could you be doing there?”

When Octavia doesn’t answer, Bellamy does. “Getting a stupid tattoo,” he deadpans.

Clarke can’t help but smile. “Are you kidding me?” She laughs a little, needing something to shake
off her nerves. “What was it going to be?”

“I don’t have the slightest idea.” Octavia admits.

“Fantastic, O.” Bellamy groans, and Clarke can hear the eyeroll in his voice. He’s still hovering.

She turns back to him. “Can you please sit down or something? It’s hard to think with you looming over me.”

He raises his eyebrows, then sinks into one of the stiff white chairs. “Whatever the princess commands.”

Clarke grits her teeth, trying to channel her focus onto the wound in front of her and not the irritating nickname. Growing up as the daughter of a powerful mother and successful father, her classmates had taken a liking to calling her “princess”, as they called Wells “prince”. Neither of them liked the terms, and it still irks them. Clarke knows it’s not a term of respect or endearment when it’s whispered behind her back.

She dips another corner of the rag into a bottle of disinfecting alcohol from her mother’s med-kit. Warning Octavia, she says, “This will sting you.” Octavia nods, gripping the sofa’s arm and bracing herself. Clarke presses down gently, but she needs to clean the wound as much as possible to get a better look. Octavia tries hard to put on a steely face, but she cries out.

Bellamy’s up in an instant, back to his diligent post over Clarke’s shoulder. He doesn’t touch Octavia or Clarke, but he looks ready to pounce. “Clarke,” he grumbles.

“It’s alcohol, Bellamy.” She spits back. “It’s going to sting a little.”

“That much?”

“Calm down, Bell.” Octavia speaks through tight teeth, composing herself. “Trust her, she’s a doctor.”

He looks Clarke up and down. “Apprentice.”

“A technicality.” Clarke says, standing up and wiping off her hands. She moves on to disinfect several of the long silver tools from her mother’s bag. “I need to remove the bullet next before I stitch up the arm. And Bellamy, I think it’d be best if you weren’t in here for that. You’re stressing me out, and stressing your sister out.”

He folds his arm over his chest. “Excuse me?”

“Bell.” Octavia’s voice is pleading yet firm. “Go wait in the kitchen. I’ll be fine.”

Bellamy hesitates, blinking rapidly, brows furrowing. Finally he hurries off around the corner, and Clarke can breathe a little.

“Thanks,” she gives Octavia a halfway smile, wiping down the last tool.

“No worries. I know he can be a little --- much sometimes.”

“You could say that again.”

“But he means well, he really does.” Octavia turns her shoulder toward Clarke again. “And since my mom died, he’s fallen into that parent role.”
Clarke isn’t sure what to say. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I hardly remember my mom. I guess I’m lucky to have Bellamy around.”

Clarke can remember her dad. She remembers what it was like when he was alive. What it was like when he suddenly wasn’t. She remembers the pain and the heartbreak. How she’d never felt so alone. “Yeah, I suppose you are.”

Of course the kitchen is perfect, Bellamy notices as he storms into the other room. It looks like a living photograph. He thinks of their small kitchen at home, with the endless piles of unwashed dishes and all-too-empty cupboards. He pictures Octavia’s little plants on the windowsill, where she tries to grow herbs and beans and small tomatoes. He’d take their kitchen any day over this overly-chrome setup.

The only thing that seems out of place is an unfinished box of dinner rations. By now, it’s long gone cold. Bellamy’s stomach growls, and he’s thinking about snatching the rest of the food when he hears Octavia.

She hisses a cry through gritted molars, and he can practically see it all in his head. He distantly hears Clarke muttering soothing words to her, little phrases of “take a deep breath” and “we’re almost there”. It’s just one bullet. It should be quick. Octavia groans again and Bellamy grips the back of a kitchen chair, head down and eyes shut. He hates this, hearing her in pain and knowing he can do nothing to help. Instead, he tries anything to distract himself. He counts the buckles and straps on his boots. He drums his fingers on the bar of the chair. He replays the day’s routine through his head.


By the time he reaches the end of the list, Octavia’s cries have subsided. All he hears now are the steady movements of Clarke, as she rummages through that med-kit or cuts a strip of bandage. He doesn’t even hear Octavia anymore, and he’s not sure what to make of that.

As Bellamy moves towards the doorway, he pauses, for the first time noticing the pictures hanging on the wall. They’re colorful and in crayon, clearly drawn by a child but not half bad. Gardens of bright flowers, sunsets and emerald trees, the smiling faces of a girl and her parents. Each one signed with a scrawl of Clarke Griffin and a heart by her name. He smirks, imagining Clarke as a toddler with a crayon in her chubby hand. Quite a change from the model Head she’s become now.

Clarke finally comes in from the living room, wiping her reddened hands off with a rag.

“Is she—”

“Octavia’s fine,” Clarke interrupts, crossing to the sink and scrubbing her fingers. “The bullet’s out, the wound is stitched up. No complications so far. She’s sleeping right now.”

“Is that a good idea? Won’t your mom be home?”

“My mom’s performing open heart surgery. I’d be shocked if she’s home before three.” There’s a weariness in Clarke’s voice that suggests that this is a routine occurrence. He glances at the remains of a lonely dinner. “You know,” Clarke calls out, drying off her hands, “I believe a thank you might
He scoffs at her smugness. “Really?”

“For digging a bullet out of your sister’s arm. Thus allowing her to avoid a trip to the clinic, and her subsequent arrest for trespassing.” Clarke turns to face him, folding her arms and leaning against the sink. “So, yes, I think it’s appropriate.”

He mirrors her posture, leaning against the doorframe. “Whatever. Thanks. And it was her idea, of course, to come here.”

“I figured as much, considering how excited you seemed to be about the whole thing.”

“Do you blame me? It’s a leap of faith to trust a total stranger with something like this.”

“Total stranger?” Clarke’s brows rise. Perhaps stranger isn’t the right word for it, even though it’s an easy word. He hasn’t known Clarke for long, but he’s certainly known of her for years. Everyone has. And Arkadia is a community of a few thousand, but new faces are rare and unusual. He’s sure she can remember him as long as he can remember her.

“Well, we’re not exactly friends, are we?” They were hardly acquaintances. The only reason they were in the same room together tonight was a friend-of-a-friend and dire circumstances.

“No, you’re right. Maybe stranger isn’t a bad word for it.” Clarke gathers the cold remnants of her rations and repackages them, sliding the box into the refrigerator. “Hungry?”

He is, but he doesn’t want her charity. “No.”

“I was going to make coffee, if you’d like any.”

He glances at the clock. “It’s nearly nine.”

“I keep more caffeine in my bloodstream than any healthy person should. Plus I need to stay awake to keep checking on Octavia.”

He hesitates. “How long are we supposed to stay here?”

“I’d like to monitor her for the next few hours, make sure the wound doesn’t show any signs of infection or start bleeding again.”

Another glance at the clock. “So, past curfew.”

Clarke pauses, about to pour a cup of water to boil. “Yeah, past curfew. If I knew for certain my mom was staying overnight at the clinic, I’d have you both just sleep here. But… I don’t know for certain.” He notices how she clams up a little, her cool composure faltering. “I’ll let you know the quietest way out of this neighborhood, I’m sure it shouldn’t be an issue.”

“Sounds like you sneak out past curfew quite a bit.”

“I’ve had my moments,“ she admits.

“Sounds fun.” He remarks, no amusement in his voice. “Maybe curfew’s a little game for privileged Heads like you, Clarke, but for the rest of us, it’s serious. It sucks, and it’s stupid, but especially for Hearts… It’s not a game.” He knows of Hearts who’ve been arrested for breaking curfew, even just once. He can name several on his fingers. He couldn’t name a single Head arrested for the same crime if his life depended on it.
“I never said it was.” Clarke spun around, voice serious.

“No, but you made it sound—-”

“Screw how I made it sound, I never said anything.” There’s clear frustration in her tone now. “Come on, Bellamy. I let you two in, stitch up your sister’s arm, and give you my word to stay silent. What more do you want from me?”

“Nothing that you can control,” he scoffs.

“Have I done something to offend you? Is the fact that I’m a Head really that repulsive to you?”

“I never said that.” He runs a hand through his messy curls, feeling awkward and intrusive. “Whatever, I’m sorry. It’s just…” He doesn’t feel like baring anything for this girl, yet here he is anyways. “Octavia doesn’t listen. I try to tell her, explain to her that – because she’s a Heart and a refugee – she has to be even more careful. Because people are going to single her out and blame her for things. But she doesn’t listen.”

“That sounds like the Octavia Blake that I know.”

“And it’s a matter of constantly staying one step ahead, because if you take the slightest step out of line, someone’s going to catch you.” Before he realizes what he’s doing, his weary feet carry him to a kitchen chair and he sinks into it. It’s not very comfortable, but he’s exhausted. “Last week this kid, Charlotte, she got it.”

Clarke nods in recognition. “Charlotte Brady. I know her.”

“Did you know her dad just died? Only family she had left.” He keeps his gaze on the polished tile countertops. “When the facilities team came to collect his belongings for redistribution, Charlotte lost it and attacked them. They locked her up for it.”

“It’s not fair. She was in grief.”

“I heard some people saying that, if she’d been a Head, the sentence might’ve been lighter. She could’ve gotten off with a warning, someone would have made the case for her mental fragility after losing her dad.” He shrugs. “I guess no one bothered to look at it that way.”

Clarke stares at the floor. “Poor Charlotte.”

*Why am I telling her this?* It’s not like it is anything she doesn’t already know. And besides, this is Clarke Griffin. *She’s got it better than almost anyone in Arkadia.* But, once he’s started, he can’t seem to stop. And there’s something about talking to Clarke… it’s almost as though he feels she could actually do something about it all. That if he complains to someone high up with connections, she might actually be able to change something. *Hell knows I can’t.*

“You’re doing alright, Bellamy.”

Her comment catches him off-guard. There’s something in her voice; it’s gentler than it should be, than he probably deserves. “What?”

“Raising Octavia. That can’t be easy, and you’re doing alright.” Clarke avoids eye contact by busying herself with the mugs and the coffee. “She told me.”

“I didn’t really have any choice. It was support Octavia, or risk losing her to relocation or foster services. We wanted to stay together.”
“Naturally. Family is everything.” She fills up a black ceramic mug for him and slides it across the countertop.

He notices a shade of sadness cross her features, and the question blurs out before he can stop it. “You lost your dad, didn’t you?” Nicely done, jackass.

“Yeah. Little over a year ago.”

“Sorry.”

“Not your fault.” She pours her own mug.

“Is it alright to ask what happened?”

“Suicide.” Clarke answers emotionlessly. “Seems there was a lot more going on under the surface than he ever let show. And one day, he decided he’d had enough of it all and he just… left.”

“You sound like you resent him for it.”

“Of course I do. I have a hundred questions for him, and most of them are why?” She stirs her coffee with a spoon, even though she hasn’t added anything to it. “I miss him more than anything.”

“Family is everything,” he echoes, staring into his own mug.

They linger there in silence, Clarke leaning on the countertop and Bellamy seated across from her. He notices the fatigue in the bags under her eyes and the sag on her shoulders. She’s usually a very pretty girl – sure, he’s taken notice of that once or twice before – but seeing her like this is like seeing a photo with the colors drained away.

Clarke rouses herself out of her own musings, muttering “Why are we talking about this?” She downs a swig of coffee, then sets the mug down with a forceful thud. “I should go check for bleeding.”

Even Bellamy, in his limited first-aid knowledge, understands that it hasn’t been long enough to justify a necessary check. But he can’t blame Clarke for wanting to leave the room. His gaze follows her as she crosses to the door. “Thanks for the coffee.”

She pauses, turning to look at him. Her face is partially in shadow, but he can tell she’s got her composed mask back on.

“No problem.”

Clarke wakes up to the sound of the front door sliding open.

She rises slowly and blearily, coming to the realization that her cheek’s been pressed flat against the cold kitchen tile for who knows how long. Her hair falls in tangles around her face. Looks like the coffee didn’t quite work.

“Clarke?” Her mother’s voice carries in from the hallway. She must’ve seen the light on in the kitchen.
The clock on the wall reads just past four in the morning. Clarke’s drooping eyes settle on an empty black mug on the counter.

_Bellamy. Octavia._

_Shit._

“My! Clarke scrambles from her seat. Her bare feet make loud footsteps as she hurries into the hall. “I can explain—”

“Why are you awake?”

That’s not the question Clarke is expecting. Her mother stands by the door, pulling off her jacket and looking puzzled but not as much as she should be. That’s when Clarke notices that both Blake’s are gone. The sofa is empty and pristine, the stained blanket gone. Even the med-kit is tucked beside the far end of the sofa, out of sight to anyone not actively looking for it.

Clarke fumbles for a lame excuse. “I was waiting up for you.”

“That’s sweet of you, but you look like you could use some sleep.” Abby ushers Clarke around the corner, waiting to see Clarke disappear into her room.

It’s only after Clarke shuts the door behind her that she exhales, and all she can think about is whether or not they made it home safely.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the great responses to my first chapter! Hope this second part keeps you all hooked, more to come! :) 
-K.T. Grace
Pretty Weeper

Oh, Miss Believer, my pretty weeper

Your twisted thoughts are like snow on the rooftops

Please, take my hand, we're in foreign land

As we travel through snow

Together we go

-Twenty-One Pilots, "Oh Ms. Believer"

Bellamy gently shakes Octavia's arm, careful not to touch too close to her shoulder. "O, you've got to get up."

She groans, shifting. "What?"

"Come on, you're getting your job assignment today."

Octavia's eyes flutter open, recognition washing over her face. "Job assignment." She pulls herself up too quickly, and Bellamy watches her falter as the sting in her arm returns. "Shit, forgot about that."

"Turn, let me get a look at the bandages." He settles onto the bed next to her with a roll of fresh bandages he's just cut from a clean shirt of his. Bellamy carefully unwraps the old dressing, relieved to see nothing more than the normal stain. Nothing unusual to what Clarke had warned him about. He peels off the used bandage and aligns the new one.

"Do you think we should've left a note?"

"For Clarke?" He furrows his brow. "And risk her mother seeing it before Clarke does?"

"Yeah, but she didn't even know we'd left. She was fast asleep."

Bellamy ties off the bandage, trying to think of anything but that mop of messy blond curls slumped in her kitchen chair. They'd contemplating waking her up, but she'd already explained the back-route out of the neighborhood, and she'd been so exhausted. Instead, they slipped away quietly. "I'm sure she knows what happened."

"Maybe I should try and find her today, tell her thank you again."

He busies himself, crossing into their tiny kitchen. Their house – the one Bellamy kept after their mother died – is small and cramped, where the kitchen and sitting room blurs into one. There is a small bathroom tucked away like a closet and only one bedroom. Octavia sleeps there, while Bellamy has retrofitted the upper attic into a little loft for himself. In the kitchen, Bellamy slides a pair of hotcakes off the frying pan for Octavia's breakfast. They're cheap to make and he's become a creative cook. "Made you breakfast. Hotcakes."
"I'm serious, Bell. She didn't have to help us."

"And she knows we're appreciative. But it'll just draw more unnecessary attention, if you seek her out to say thank you." He takes the slightly burnt cakes. "You need to keep a low profile anyways."

"Fine." Octavia growls into her breakfast. "I'm not asking for your permission by the way."

"Wouldn't be a bad idea. Just because you're patched up now doesn't mean I've forgotten about the fact that you were nearly arrested, Octavia." He feels that frustration simmering low in his stomach. "It was completely reckless."

"We weren't supposed to get caught."

"Of course not. But you wouldn't have gone if there wasn't some risk involved, right?" She won't meet his gaze. "O, you're a graduate now. An adult. They're not going to treat you like a child if you get caught, you'll be tried as an adult. I can't protect you from that."

"I'm not looking for your protection. I don't need that. Just let me make my own decisions."

Bellamy freezes. He should've seen that sort of comment coming, but it still catches him off-guard. He pictures Octavia standing, scared, in the bushes with a bleeding arm. He hears her cries when Clarke fishes a bullet out of her flesh. My own decisions. He drops his plate into the sink, leaving it to deal with later. "I'm going to be late," he mutters.

"Bell..." she begins, and he can hear the change in her voice. She's regretting what she said. Good.

He laces up his boots.

"I'll see you when I get home tonight."

"Bellamy, come on."

He's out the door before he can hear another word about my own decisions.

It's still early in the morning, and the sky overhead is gray and foggy. Bellamy passes the same familiar houses on his street, all smaller and slightly haphazard. There's no denying that these houses are pathetic compared to ones like Clarke's, these being older and made from cheaper wood and brick instead of carbon compounds and plexiglass. Every single house on this street is owned by a Heart. Bellamy knows there are a few Heads living a block or two over, but they're recent refugees.

"Bye Bellamy!" He hears a small voice from behind him, and he turns around. It's Ari, a seven year old playing on the front step of his house. Bellamy knows his mother, a hardworking woman trying to raise four children all by herself. He's looked after Ari and the other siblings before.

"Bye Ari," he waves, watching a smile blossom on the child's face. As he rounds the corner, he can't help but worry about kids like Ari. He's the oldest of his brothers and sisters and he's growing up without a great family background. He's the sort of kid who'll struggle under the system.

Bellamy was Ari's age when he came to Arkadia. All he can remember from the outside world lies in fragmented slivers in his brain: a hovel of a home, gruff men in armor who always gave his mother a hard time, a long trek through the forest to make it to the wall. He can vaguely remember the system test, and being told that he was a Heart. He had no idea what to make of that. Bellamy does remember when Aurora was sorted as a Heart, and the relief that washed over her face when she heard Bellamy was too.

"Thank God. They won't separate us."
Looking back, Bellamy isn't sure if he would've been taken from his mother if he'd be sorted a Head. But a person always hears rumors, grumblings about some awful truth that happened to some unnamed refugee. And part of him believes them.

Bellamy approaches the guard training facility from the less-popular path, leading up to a side door. He goes out of his way to avoid the main entrance, where trainees usually come and go through the fancy shiny lobby and double doors. With all of the photos of new initiates and the wall of fame and everything. It makes his blood boil.

He'd learned the hard way that the universe has a sick sense of humor. After working his ass off in school and graduating, Bellamy wanted nothing more than to become a guard. He woke up at the crack of dawn the day of his job assignment, being the third graduate in line to register. His credentials were all appropriate, his prepwork complete and ready.

He'd been assigned to janitor duty in the training facility. Instead of becoming a guard, he had to clean up the shit they left behind.

Fed up, Bellamy applied for an occupation transfer almost immediately after. Two years ago, twenty-seven months to be exact. He checks for updates religiously, every three months, but they always tell him he's still on the waiting list. That they can't accommodate to his request at the moment. They find a thousand fancy ways to say no, and at the end of it all, Bellamy is still stuck with his janitor suit and a toilet brush.

"It could just be the nature of the job," Octavia would usually say, trying to cheer him up. "I mean, you're applying to be a guard. They have so many guards to begin with, maybe they're overstaffed."

But Bellamy hears the same recruitment messages as everyone else, hearing the call for border and security guards. He's seen men and women younger than him – fresh graduates, practically kids – get called up for training while he rots on the waiting list.

He scans his passcard at the door and pushes through, walking the familiar route to the locker room. It's empty, as Bellamy's at work before he has to be. Shumway made him come early to make up for a shorter shift yesterday. Bellamy unlatches his locker, tugging the dusty blue jumpsuit over his clothes and trying to ignore the musty odor. He hates it, all of it.

The door behind him opens, and Bellamy spins to see Shumway enter. Officer Shumway is an intermediate-rank superior, but he oversees the management staff at the training facility, including Bellamy. "Mr. Blake."

"Sir," Bellamy nods.

"I'm going to have to ask you to gather your things and clear out your locker."

Bellamy's face goes slack, horror sinking in. "But sir," he stammers. "I'm here early to make up for taking off early yesterday. We'd talked about this, made arrangements."

"Blake, you're not being fired. You're being relocated."

Bellamy can breathe again. "Relocated, where?"

"The clinic. They're understaffed and requested more janitorial workers." Shumway gives Bellamy a once-over glance, clearly not heartbroken to be losing him. "You'll no longer be under my jurisdiction, so hand over your passcard and clean out your things. Keep the jumpsuit, though, you'll need it."
Bellamy hands over his card, mind spinning. He can finally leave this stupid training facility, leave the smirking trainees and the overhanging feeling of inadequacy as he's left to clean up after them. Perhaps the clinic can give him a fresh start.

Clarke walks to her morning shift alone, the first time she's starting her day at work instead of school. After the surgery ran into the early hours of the morning, Abby was dismissed until her evening shift. If. Instead, she was awake and with her daughter, Clarke can perfectly imagine what she'd be saying: Abby would be chewing her ear off about Clarke's new responsibilities at the clinic and how much she's going to love it all.

Clarke shrugs to herself. It's just work. And she has to actively fight to keep the sleepiness out of her eyes after a night of patchy, complicated rest.

Clarke reaches the clinic in minutes. She weaves through the brilliantly-white hallways to reach the break room, where she slips into her set of scrubs hanging in the closet. They've already got her name embroidered onto the tag: C. Griffin. The squeaky mint polyester is familiar, and it reminds her that there is work to be done.

Falling into routine, Clarke stops at the floor's main desk to receive her folder of paperwork. She rifles through it, feeling more in the stack than usual. She reaches the third page by the time she feels a light hand on her shoulder.

"Clarke."

She turns, recognizing Doctor Jackson, one of her superiors and a close friend of her mother's. He's young, probably late twenties, making him perhaps the second youngest doctor in the clinic – after Clarke.

There's also something strange in his face. His wide dark eyes seem watery, and he keeps his mouth in a thin line. Something is wrong.

"What is it?"

"May I have a word with you? In private?"

Clarke nods, following Jackson to a quieter corner of the hallway. Her stomach squirms uncomfortably. "Is something wrong?"

Jackson keeps his voice low and controlled. "We lost a patient, Clarke. In the middle of the night."

Clarke finally recognizes that tone. Deaths, even unavoidable ones, always hit the clinic hard. It's certainly a common experience, but there's something different about how Jackson delivers this one. "It was one of my patients, wasn't it?"

Jackson swallows, then nods.

"Who?"

"Becca Pramheda."

Clarke sways a little, taken aback by this. So she didn't lose the patient fighting cancer, or the one
with lungs as black and hole-riddled as an old sponge. She lost Becca Pramheda, the young woman institutionalized for mental instability. Sister to Alie Pramheda, councilwoman. Clarke's brain is slow to catch up. "Becca? But she was healthy, she was fine. I checked on her the day before yesterday. I cleared her."

"The full report isn't back yet, but it seems there was a complication with her medications."

Clarke shakes her head, refusing to accept the reality. "No, I cleared her medications. I always did. She's been on those doses for years, nothing's changed."

"These medications have strange side effects," Jackson explains slowly, as though he's speaking to a child. He may as well be, for all the listening Clarke's doing. "Something was off. It appears that the pills had small negative effects that compounded over prolonged use. By the time we checked on her, her blood toxicity levels were too high."

"I should've thought of that. I should've run a test, it's been so long since she's had her blood tested-"

"Clarke." Jackson grabs Clarke's shoulders, anchoring her and looking her straight in the eyes. For all of the racing emotions ripping through her, Clarke is grateful to have Jackson as a friend. "This isn't something any of us predicted. You couldn't have guessed this would happen. It's not your fault."

"I was her doctor. I should've known."

"No one did." His voice is heavy with sympathy. "Listen, take the rest of the morning. Use it to calm down, take some time. If you can clock back in this afternoon that'd be great, if not, we'll cover for you. I know it's not easy the first time you lose a patient."

"She was the first patient I'd been assigned myself."

"I know, Clarke. So take a break." He gives her shoulders a reassuring squeeze. "I need to check in down the hall, but I'll be around. Maybe go home and talk to your mother?"

Even though she knows her mother means well, Clarke decides Abby is the last person she wants to speak with right now. She shakes her head, blinking the hovering tears out of her eyelashes. "No, I think I'll be okay. I'll clock in at noon."

Jackson nods, "Noon." He leaves her with a sad smile. Clarke stands by herself, the lone person in this wing of the hallway. The usual buzz of clinic sounds – the beeping machines, squeaking gurney wheels, hushed quick words - seems muted, like they're several miles away. The clinic is a place of life, yes, but the inescapable shadow of death lingers. And on days like today, Clarke can feel its shade.

*But death is natural,* Clarke imagines her mother saying, *all rationale and logic and no real sympathy beyond surface-level emotion. It's part of life, something even Arkadia can't escape. And the clinic has helped save so many lives, so many people...* Clarke can practically hear Abby in her ear, plunging into some gloomy anecdote about what the world must've been like before Arkadia and its refined technology. Because that's how her mother operates: emotions are to be justified and supported by facts. There's no feeling for the sake of feeling. At the end of the day, reasoning wins out.

Sometimes, Clarke doesn't want to have to justify her feelings. She doesn't want to hear empty explanations, nothing but puffed-up words disappearing into air. But that's not the way Heads work.

So she grants herself ten seconds. Ten counts of grief and memory and emotion.
Clarke remembers meeting Becca Pramheda, and being struck by how normal she was. She was kind and cooperative, even with all of Clarke's annoying tests and routine questionnaires.

Clarke began borrowing books from the library for Becca, after seeing her patient reading the same clinic-owned novel for the third time. Becca's eyes shone the brightest with a book between her fingers.

Becca's only family was her twin sister, Alie. But Alie never gave Becca the time of day, and certainly not when she was institutionalized for delusions and emotional unreliability. Occasionally Becca would ask Clarke if her sister had been by, or if she'd left any messages. After a year or so, Becca learned not to bother asking.

Clarke counted out the pills in the palm of her hand: two white, one blue, one brown and half a green tablet. That was Becca's Saturday dose. Clarke had it memorized.

Clarke squeezes her eyes shut, then forces them open. That's it. Mourning time is over. There's plenty to do.

Bellamy's not quite sure what to make of work at the clinic. Sure, the building is newer and in nicer condition, with the spotless linoleum floors and chrome surfaces that he's sure he'll come to hate polishing. He's replaced the old odor of sweat and blood with a thick stench of disinfecting products. The lights are brighter, and if he focuses on it he's sure he can hear the fluorescent bulbs hum.

Instead of mopping off combat mats or scrubbing out locker rooms, Bellamy's first assignment is clearing an old patient's room. His stomach flip-flops at this, but he just nods. Apparently, the patient died overnight. His mind conjures up images of bloodstains and bile.

He moves slowly down a hallway, eyes combing the identical doorplates for the right number. The cart he pushes is cumbersome and loaded with special cleaning substances, odd bottles of blue and milky liquids that he's never touched before. It takes him a solid ten minutes before he finds the right room, tucked back in a forgotten corner.

Before he learns a thing about the deceased patient, he knows they've lived here for a long time. This room doesn't feel like the others he's passed; it's not as empty and generic. There are small withering plants struggling to grow on the windowsill. One of the tall cabinet doors hangs open, used as a closet instead of medical storage. And there are books in piles all over: on the small table by the window, along the shelves and countertops, tucked into the baseboard at the foot of the bed.
Something about the sight of the room drags down Bellamy's energy, weighing heavy in his stomach. He wishes he'd been assigned to some other room occupied by some transient patient, not someone who's clearly lived here for a while. It feels like he's erasing their memory.

He begins with the books, gathering them up and placing them in one of the standard black bags he's equipped with. Bellamy labels the bag, reminding himself to send them to the library at City Center. Next to go are the plants, which – to his dismay – are too far gone to be saved. He pulls the simple clothing from the cabinet, rereading the memo he'd been given at his assignment: Donate personal belongings for redistribution. His focus on his work isn't enough to distract him from the questions swimming in his brain, wondering who'd authorized that memo and if the patient had anyone left who'd care about their memory at all.

Bellamy's work is mindless and methodical. He strips the bed of the scratchy sheets, bundling them in the cart's hamper as he hoses down the cot with disinfectant. Through the bleach-smelling steam, he notices something lumpy in the mattress, and he reaches a hand under the cover. It's a notebook, small and leatherbound, with a small loop of cord over the covers to keep it shut. He can guess it's a journal, likely from the old patient. Holding it in his hand, Bellamy can see the scratches and fades on the leather cover, the signs of worn and use. It feels wrong to donate the notebook, and worse to just throw it away. He stashes it on the cart, vowing to return it to one of his superiors or something.

After the bed, Bellamy begins scrubbing down the surfaces. He begins in the small bathroom and working his way towards the window. His fingers are numb and his nose burns from the cleaner's smell when he flips over the small table to scrub off the bottom.

His hand freezes at the sight of letters. There has to be hundreds of them on the underside of the table, all written in different widths of black ink. Some look like lines of poetry or quotes, but they read like gibberish. Some are odd symbols that cannot be real letters, like some child's drawings or the footprints of a strange bird. They overlap and interweave and they make his head dizzy as he tries to read them. He imagines there are years of musings written underneath this tabletop.

But one word is repeated a dozen times, maybe more. Each time, it's written in the same way: all capital letters, with a funny looking "A".

KANE

It's that word, that dangerous tabooed word, that spurs Bellamy back into action. He lunges for his brush and spray bottle, quickly dousing the table in fluid as though someone's watching over his shoulders, as though he'll get in trouble for simply reading that word. He brushes vigorously, but the pen's marks won't budge. He swears.

Paint. There's got to be paint somewhere, something he can use to cover the graffiti, to erase it. Bellamy gets up and starts digging through the cart, browsing through the unfamiliar bottles and pots for anything useful. He doesn't notice someone at the door until he hears a voice.

"Oh, sorry, I didn't know someone was still cleaning in here."

Bellamy knows that voice. He jerks up to his full height, watching recognition cross Clarke Griffin's face. She's wearing the green uniform of a doctor, but her face is flushed and blotchy. He notices the ring of wetness around her eyes.

"Bellamy?" Her gaze flickers over his jumpsuit, to the cart. "Since when do you work here?"

"Since I got reassigned this morning."
"Oh." She seems to linger awkwardly in the doorway, hesitant as to whether or not she should enter. He can't ignore the ruddiness in her face and eyes. "You okay?"

She shrugs. "I'll be fine."

"Did you know them?"

"Who?"

"The patient who lived here." He notices how that registers, the way Clarke stiffens and seems to retreat into herself.

She nods, then finally crosses the threshold and enters the room. "She was the first patient I'd been assigned to, so I've known her the longest."

Instead of hovering by the cart, Bellamy settles against the wall and listens. "What was her name?"

"Becca Pramheda." A flicker of a smile skids across Clarke's lips.

"Pramheda, like the councilwoman? What's her name…"

"Alie Pramheda. She has – had – a twin sister." Clarke sits on the edge of the mattress, playing with a fraying thread at the end of her sleeve.

"I had no idea."

"Not many people do, apparently. Becca was institutionalized a few years ago, before I'd started." An unspoken dialogue hangs between them: The clinic – for all of its technology and resources – usually couldn't support a patient for longer than a year. The fact that Becca had lived there for many spoke to Alie's influence on the council, and her ability to bypass the rules. "She'd been diagnosed with several mental complications, but she never seemed… off. She was sharp, always reading and asking questions. She didn't seem different from anyone."

He hears the crack in Clarke's voice and notices a tremble in her shoulders. "They said she died some time overnight, some poisoning from her medication. From the medication I'd been giving her." Her breathing becomes more shallow and quick. "I don't know why that happened, or if it was at least quick when she… when she went. Because I wasn't there."

"Hey," Bellamy crosses to her side, but hesitates at the foot of the bed, unsure of how to make things better, or if it's even worth trying. "You can't blame yourself for this, Clarke. You're an apprentice, of course you wouldn't be here in the middle of the night. You were wrapping up Octavia's arm in the middle of the night."

"She wasn't just my patient." Clarke speaks through quick sobbing breaths. "She was my friend."

Bellamy is frozen, afraid of crossing a line. This isn't Octavia, who he would comfort by sweeping her into a bear-hug or combing out her long dark hair. This is Clarke Griffin, a girl he hardly even knows. But he thinks of her healing Octavia, or sharing coffee with him in her kitchen, and he catches on to those little cracks in her perfect façade, those little pieces that keep her human. He places a hand on her shoulder; it's not threatening or intrusive, but it feels right. Clarke sways a little into his grip, shaking from the uneven breaths as she tries to pull herself together.

For no reason at all, Bellamy suddenly remembers the journal he found. Leaving with a gentle squeeze, he digs through the cart and pulls out the leather-bound book. "I found this in the mattress, I
think it's a journal or diary or something. If Becca's lived in here for several years, then it must be hers."

Clarke nods, registering it in some distant memory. "I can get it to her sister. Perhaps Alie will want it."

"Yeah," Bellamy looks at the floor sheepishly. "Sounds like she'd instructed that Becca's belongings be donated to redistribution or tossed. But throwing that journal away just… didn't feel right."

Clarke swallows, and he watches her turn it over slowly in her grasp. Her narrow fingers skim over the worn leather and uneven page edges. "I'll offer it anyways. If Alie doesn't want it, then it's her loss."

He nods, and they settle into a long silence. It's not uncomfortable, but it's like they've both decided that their words are empty. Bellamy's glance passes across the room, almost finished with his work… but then there's the table. Something catches in his throat, and he's not quite sure if he should tell Clarke about what's written underneath. He frowns.

"What is it?" She asks, noticing his glare over at the table. It's an innocent question.

He tosses a look back at the door, halfway open and leading to a quiet hallway. Bellamy lowers his voice and beckons Clarke over. "Here."

They crouch down beside the table as he leans it on its side, exposing the vandalized bottom. Clarke's eyes go wide, her lips parted breathlessly as she runs her hand over the words. "What are all these?"

"Some look older than others, see the ones on the bottom? Some are practically new." Clarke's fingers track along the interweaving lines of words, stopping when she reaches KANE. She flinches and pulls her finger away, like she's been burned.

"No." She shakes her head, as though arguing. "No, I don't believe it."

"Believe what? Clarke, the markings are right here."

"Becca was normal, she was ordinary. There was nothing strange or… or dangerous about her."

It's that word, KANE; it gives her pause and makes her jumpy just like it did to him. "Maybe they were just musings. Maybe, maybe her conditions caused her to act out like this."

"And leads her to write forbidden words underneath a clinic table?" Clarke sounds incredulous. "It's one thing to slip up and say his name in passing. It's another thing entirely to vandalize public equipment with the name of a rebel anarchist!" She backs away. "I refuse to believe that Becca did this."

"Who else, Clarke?" He says. "Check that journal, see if the handwriting matches."

In response, Clarke holds the journal closer to her chest than before. "Absolutely not." The reddish color has drained from her face, leaving her pale.

Bellamy turns back to the table, pointing at the A in KANE. "This isn't just scrawl, Clarke. Look at that letter, and the extra lines she's added. You can see the Heart symbol, and-""

"And the Head arrow. I noticed." Her voice is different now, less panicked but colder. Defensive. "I
"What is it?"

She pauses, then says, "I've seen it before. Written that way with that A."

"What are you talking about?"

She looks reluctant to talk, but does so anyways. "Yesterday, before you and Octavia showed up at my house, I went to some climbing trees with a few friends. For nostalgia's sake. We were pretty close to the wall, and we looked down and saw that someone had painted it – Kane – right on the wall itself. We found it around the same time the border guards did, and we ran."

He recalls her jumpy manner at the door, the scissors she'd armed herself with. "That's why you were acting strange last night."

Clarke nods. "The graffiti, it was the exactly same sign as there." She points to the table. "Same capitalized letters, same weird A. Everything." Clarke hugs her arms around herself. "Maybe it's just some strange coincidence?"

"Maybe," Bellamy breathes, but they both know that it's most likely not.
Octavia keeps her arms folded across her chest and her eyes moving, scanning the people around her. Her brain combs back through the night before, trying to remember any cameras that might’ve seen her face or any guard who’d glimpsed enough to identify her. And now, standing in the open, trapped in a line outside the job distribution center, it’s not so easy to hide.

But it’s not like she has any choice. Today’s her day to receive a job, from the assigned window of seven in the morning to three in the afternoon. She can’t risk the trouble she’ll get into – from the officials, or her brother – if she skips her assignment.

So she waits. The line snakes out the front door of the building, wrapping along the sidewalk. Octavia has been waiting for longer than an hour, her feet beginning to sting and whine. She shifts her weight between them, doing anything to distract herself from the perpetual aching in her shoulder. Carefully, Octavia rolls her arm, feeling to see the range of motion she’s given. The muscle is sore and the skin is tender, but she hasn’t felt any of the stitches pulling or noticed any unusual bleeding. Clarke did a good job of patching her up.

Clarke. Octavia still feels a little guilty for dragging Clarke into all of this. Her mind shuffles through a thousand situations where Octavia got arrested and a guard noticed her bullet wound – what would happen if they found out it was Clarke who’d helped Octavia? And her brother’s rude behavior last night didn’t make things any less mortifying for Octavia, or any easier for Clarke. If she didn’t know any better, Bellamy was going out of his way to set Clarke off.

The line inches up, and Octavia follows. Soon, she’ll be at the doorway, where she’ll begin the
paperwork process. Again, she scans the area. There are plenty of graduates around, and one guard placed at the door to keep things from getting out of hand, but he doesn’t seem to notice her. She keeps her head downwards, hair in her face and tugging the cuff of her long-sleeved shirt to her wrist.

Minutes crawl by like an inchworm across a street. Octavia’s feet buzz and fade into numbness by the time she steps into the building. It’s darker and cooler inside, and the air feels damper than it should be. There’s a long gray pathway indicated by marks on the squeaky floor, and Octavia follows the curve to the first table. It’s enormous and littered with stacks of paper, an assembly line of documents to be completed and processed. Octavia starts with the first one, a flimsy vellum sheet.

**Name: Octavia Blake**

She can’t shake off the feeling that someone is watching her. Octavia’s letters tremble with her jitteriness, and she hurries to finish the first sheet. She records her family info, her height and weight and body specifications, documents herself as a refugee at age four. The next page focuses on her academic history and accomplishments; they’re not spectacular or really noteworthy, but she’s graduated nonetheless. More forms get passed down the line: medical, financial, social. Octavia’s hand hurts nearly as much as her feet by the time she finishes.

Sliding the last paper into its respective pile, she follows the path to a corner of the room where a camera’s been set up. She’s to receive her updated identification card, as a graduate and an adult. Octavia hesitates, and suddenly this innocent photo feels more like a mugshot than anything else.

“Step up to the mark,” a middle-aged woman grumbles from her stool behind the camera. Octavia nods, footfalls heavy as she makes her way to an “x” on the floor. She raises her head slowly.

“Push the hair out of your eyes.” Octavia grits the teeth, tucking a lock of her ebony hair behind an ear. She looks into the camera with as much ferocity as if she was facing off with a guard, or with the damn Chancellor himself. She keeps her glare steely even as the camera flashes and catches her by surprise.

A machine to her left whirs to life, and she watches when the small white card is spat out the end. She picks it up, turning it over in her palm. Her face in the photo looks practically murderous. It’s perfect.

Octavia continues along the path, finally reaching the row of small windows on the far end of the room. She steps up to the only open one, where a doughy man sits with a vacant stare. She tilts her chin up, ready to stare her future in the face.

“Last name?” He asks.

“Blake.”

The man shuffles through a stack of envelopes. “First name?”

“Octavia.” There’s only one Blake her age, anyways.

The man withdraws an oatmeal-colored envelope with her name printed on the front label. Sliding his pudgy fingers along the seal, he opens it and reads. “Octavia Blake, age seventeen. Heart. Assigned to packing and sorting, warehouse H. Report for duty tomorrow at eight AM.”
Wells stands opposite the locked door, pressing his passcard to the scanner to be read. For a moment, he catches his reflection in the polished chrome of the door: tall and strong, dark-skinned with darker eyes. A stance of authority and confidence, even when he feels like he has none. For a moment, he’s practically his father in that chrome. A perfect image.

Then the door slides open, and a draft of cold air greets him. The administrative building always feels colder than any of the other buildings in Arkadia, full of winding hallways and a constant battle between harsh fluorescent lights and shadowy corners. This room in particular is lit with a bright blue glow coming from the semi-transparent glass screens on the walls. Even the large table in the center is one big screen, scribbled with writing across it in hurried strokes. Standing there clutching a cup of black coffee in a plastic cup, Wells expects to find his father. He doesn’t expect to see several other councilmembers in the room as well.

He recognizes them immediately: Charles Pike, Heart, stands beside a board writing notes in glowing green pen. There’s Cage Wallace, Head, engaged in hushed conversation with Anya Woods, Heart. He recognizes Lorelei Tsing with Alie Pramheda, both Heads and both dressed impeccably. And finally, Abby Griffin standing just over the shoulder of his father, eyebrows furrowed in a way that looks too much like her daughter.

“Wells.” Jaha rises to his full height. “I wasn’t expecting you to be here.”

Wells is aware of the awkwardness that’s sunk into the room. All eyes linger on him now. “Today was assignment day. But since I’ve already got my assignment, I figured it was just another day of work.”

“Of course.” Jaha nods the confusion off his face, beckoning for Wells to join him by his side. As Wells does, he’s aware of several of the councilmembers slipping out the door behind him. Only Abby, Pike, and his father remain.

“This is for you,” Wells gives his father the coffee, knowing he won’t refuse it. “Your assistant told me you’d be here.”

“I spend most of my days in here.” Jaha says, beginning at a meandering pace through the maze of screens and boards. He walks with his hands clasped behind his back, taking lazy strides. Wells follows at his side. “It’s the room where decisions are made.”

“I know that.”

“You’ve been in here before?” Jaha raises a brow.

“No, of course not. But I’ve heard plenty about it.”

“Hopefully not too much,” Jaha says with a slight smirk. “Get used to it, son. I imagine you’ll be spending more time in here as you shadow me. It won’t be long before you’re groomed into a proper councilman yourself.”

Something about that statement turns Wells’s stomach. He’s always known he’d follow in his father’s footsteps, but that doesn’t necessarily mean he agrees with the methods of doing so. He recalls a conversation they had many years ago, when he asked his father about the council.

“Isn’t it a little silly,” he said, “that I’ll be training to be a councilman, shadowing you, when the council seats are decided by public vote? What if they don’t vote me in?”
“You’re a Jaha. You’re the son of the chancellor. You will have trained for many years for this job, making you more than qualified for the role. You will be voted in.”

“But what if something goes wrong? What if the people really hate me?”

“There are many different ways to win an election, Wells. And only some of them have to do with the number of votes.”

“Can I ask what all of these are?” Wells says, glancing over at the screens. He recognizes maps and various photos from throughout Arkadia, along with handwritten lists and brainstorm webs.

“Some of them,” Jaha answers. “We’re currently exploring some… changes around Arkadia.”

Wells pauses, feeling he’s overstepped a boundary. Oddly enough, it’s councilman Pike who speaks next. “It’s a new program your father is spearheading, one aimed at improving the quality of life for Hearts throughout Arkadia.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s been in discussion for some time now,” Pike explains, leaning against a table. “The growing poverty gap here hasn’t gone unnoticed, and we realize that most of those affected are working-class Hearts. Coming from similar origins, you can understand why this program means quite a bit to me.”

“So what are you doing about it?”

“Your father, along with several of the other councilmembers, suggested that we begin with the housing. These people live in conditions that are unacceptable for who we want to be as Arkadians. There’s a plan on the board – in the early stages – to replace those homes with something safer and sturdier.”

Wells gets a closer look at the maps on the walls around him, and he recognizes familiar zones within Arkadia. They’re all predominantly poorer areas. “That’s… that’s fantastic,” he says. “But a project of this scale hasn’t been completed since…”

“Since Arkadia’s founding.” Jaha finishes. “We’re still working out the logistics of this, but that’s where you’ll come in. We need someone to help us present this project to the masses, to help them understand what we’re doing and the process it’ll take. It would be a good way for you to connect with the public, practice your communication skills.” His dark eyes are firm, yet full of pride. “What do you say, Wells?”

Wells swallows. This is his chance. “Of course.”

“Warehouse duty?” Raven repeats, swiveling around in her chair. The seat is old and worn, an odd-looking patchwork of thick silver tape and miscellaneous parts. Still, it can spin and roll and doesn’t even squeak – and that’s something she’s rather proud of.

“Yup,” Octavia groans. She sits on Raven’s bed, picking at the fraying spots on the blanket. Raven’s room is tiny, the spare room in the back of the Collins’s house. But, given Finn’s generosity and kindness towards Raven’s complicated domestic situation, she’s not one to complain.
“That sucks. Warehouse H is, what…?”

“Grains, beans, and legumes.” Octavia recites the description she’s memorized from her information packet. “How thrilling.”

“At least you didn’t get assigned to meat packing or something like that. You’d stink like a rotting carcass six days a week.” Raven picks up the little project she’s been tinkering on: the rusty metal shell of an old digital alarm clock.

“How do you manage to look at the bright side of situations like that?”

Raven shrugs. “The way I see it, we’ve all got two options: wallow in self-pity and misery and realize that’s doing nothing, or slap on a halfway-happy face and push ourselves through. Look at your brother. He’s been trying to get a job transfer for how long?”

“Two years,” Octavia grumbles.

“Two years. So, yeah, maybe they gave us shit jobs, but it could be a whole lot worse.” She swings her long ponytail out of her face and over her shoulder. “On my own bright side, I got a nifty uniform for my job.”

Octavia reaches for the crumpled pile of clothes on the bed: it’s an ash-gray jumpsuit, nasty and stained. It’s the color of dirty cement. She laughs a little. “Raven, it’s awful.”

“Isn’t it? And it reeks even worse than it looks.” Raven laughs back, but there’s no humor in it.

“What is your job anyways?” Octavia asks, reaching for Raven’s envelope. “Building maintenance, that’s a broad term.”

“That’s what I thought. I even hoped I’d get to do something exciting, like work on the drafting teams or something. Then I read the fine print inside, and I’m basically checking for cracks in the foundations. That’s it.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“Walking around inspecting old buildings, that’s how I’m going to spend the rest of my life. If I’m really lucky, they may even promote me to inspect the plumbing.” Her voice drips with sarcasm, sickly sweet. “Can’t believe I worked my ass off through school for this.”

“You know it doesn’t have anything to do with how hard you’ve worked.” Octavia deadpans. “We both know what it all comes down to.”

They sit in silence, each staring at the tattoo under their thumbs.

Raven clears her throat, using the pointy end of her screwdriver to dig some grease out from underneath her fingernail. “I thought, you know, I thought I could prove myself in school.” She suddenly sounds hesitant, unsure of the words leaving her mouth. “I thought I could show just how smart I was. And maybe… maybe it would mean more than the tattoo. That I could, I don’t know…”

“Raven, you’re a Heart.”

“I know. Of course I know. But…” She digs her fingers into the hair at the crown of her head. “The system tells me I’m a Heart, and I know I’m a Heart. But I don’t always feel like one.”

“You think you’re sorted incorrectly?” Octavia can’t believe Raven’s seriously talking about this.
“Maybe it’s not incorrect. Maybe I’m… in between. What if you could be both? A Head, and a Heart?”

Octavia looks around the bedroom, as if Raven speaking such words would send guards charging down upon them or something. “Raven, you know that’s not how it works. The system is one or the other.”

“But I’m not one or the other!” Raven kicks the table leg. “I was sorted when I was a kid, just like everyone else. We grow up. We change. Maybe that’s not as accurate as it used to be.” She swivels slowly in her chair, drifting from side to side. “If it wasn’t a big deal, if it wasn’t anything more than an empty label, then I wouldn’t care so much.” Raven scratches at her tattoo with a grimy fingernail. “But it means everything. It tells you your place, your future, what you can and can’t do. And everything is telling me that I’m a Heart but I don’t think so.”

“Raven.” Octavia grabs her shoulder, lowering her voice. “Listen, you want to say that kind of stuff? Say it quietly, and say it at home. But that’s not something anyone talks about, and there are plenty of people who’d view it as treason or rebellion.”

“Jesus, I’m not plastering it on the walls or speaking into a megaphone.” Raven groans. “I’m saying it here. I’m at home. With you.”

“I know, I just…” Octavia’s voice fades off. The encounter with the guards – and getting shot by one – has made her more suspicious and jumpier than usual. “Be careful.”

“They control my past, my future.” Raven mutters, more to herself than her friend. “They control where I get to work, where I live. They control what I do, what I can say. But they don’t get to control what I think.”

When Clarke notices her responsibilities for the day end earlier than usually, she knows Jackson must’ve shifted things for her so she could go home. It’s a kind thought, but that’s not usually how she handles grief. Clarke needs to be busy. She needs something to keep her mind occupied and moving. And yet, the clinic isn’t a good place for idle hands loitering in the tiny hallways. So Clarke hangs up her scrubs and heads home.

And there’s plenty on her mind, as she walks with Becca’s journal in her shoulderbag. The notebook is small and light, but it might as well be burning a hole through the bag for the way Clarke regards it. She knows she should take it straight to Alie Pramheda’s right now, but she’s certain Alie is still at work. She could give it to Wells, since he works at the administrative building… Yes, she resolves to do that tomorrow. She’ll give it to him tomorrow.

Clarke enters her empty home alone, and immediately the silence becomes stifling. She sways a little, a nonexistent ring echoing hollowly in her ears. KANE. The letters under Becca’s table spelled Kane, just like on the wall. At her side, the journal suddenly feels like it weighs a hundred pounds in her bag. Clarke dumps it out onto the floor, watching the worn leather cover bounce and skid to a stop. She looks down at it, afraid to pick it up. But she has to; she can’t let her mother find it, especially if it has anything to do with rebel activities. Clarke bends, picking it up by two fingers and hurries to her room.

She shuts the door behind her before remembering she’s the only one home. Her room is just as
Clarke grabs a handful of her comforter, tugging on the blue fabric until it pulls out from its careful folds. The pillows slide, the blankets shift. Her perfectly-made bed is now perfectly *imperfect*, and something about that lifts some of the suffocating feeling off her chest.

Clarke settles onto the bed, sitting far back enough where her feet dangle over the edge. She looks down, the journal still in her hands. Her door is shut, she’s completely alone. Slowly, cautiously, Clarke peels the cover open, eyes guiltily scanning the papers underneath. The first page is brown with age and slightly brittle, but there’s no mistaking Becca Pramheda’s name written in the top corner.

Something stirs deep within Clarke’s stomach. She knows – every *fiber* of her body knows – that what she’s doing is wrong. She should leave the journal alone and deliver it to Alie tomorrow. But it’s as though the book is calling to her, extending some invisible, seductive tendrils around her racing mind and pulling her towards the unopened pages. Clarke can’t seem to shake the feeling that this journal is incredibly, undeniably *important*.

So she flips the page, eyes darting hungrily to the top of the first line, and begins to read.

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There’s a knock at the door.

Bellamy freezes, and so does Octavia. He glances to her, where she stands at the sink rinsing off her last dinner dish. She shrugs, eyes wide and questioning. He rises from his chair at the second, urgent round of knocking. “Stay in the kitchen,” he whispers to her, and moves slowly to unlock the door.

“Clarke?”

“Oh good, you’re home.” Clarke brushes past him and lets herself in.

“Yes I’m home, it’s nearly curfew.” He blinks rapidly. “What… the *hell* are you doing here?”

“I needed to talk to you.”

“Now?” Bellamy looks around, incredulous. Octavia comes up behind him from the kitchen.

“Yes, now. Hi Octavia.” Clarke gives a little wave, then adds as an afterthought, “How’s the arm?”

“It’s fine.” Octavia’s clear confusion mirrors her brother’s.

“Great. Can Bellamy and I have a little privacy?”

Bellamy nearly laughs out loud at the feisty little blonde in front of him, who’s just taken over his house and is now giving orders. He folds his arms and raises an eyebrow. “Should we go outside?”

“No,” she says all too quickly. “No, I think indoors is best. Octavia?”

Bellamy turns to his sister, who looks just as lost as he feels. “O, can you go wait in the bedroom?” She nods, mute, and leaves.

Bellamy motions towards the dining table, but Clarke doesn’t even bother. Instead, she just reaches
“Wait, you’ve been reading that?” Bellamy pointed at the notebook. “Clarke, you really shouldn’t. You should get rid of that.”

“I know, I know. And I’m going to. Or, I was going to, but now,” She flips through the pages. “I can’t. There’s so much in here, Bellamy.”

“Yeah, and you have no business reading that.”

“Some of the stuff Becca’s writing in here, it’s…it’s scary, but it’s so true. Things about Arkadia, about the system. She’s challenging everything.”

He takes a desperate step towards Clarke. “She was institutionalized for mental instability, Clarke. She was certifiably crazy.”

“She never seemed like it.” Clarke insists. “And what she’s written, it’s coherent and smart and it all makes sense. All these little details people have been missing, about all this messed-up shit that’s happening in Arkadia right under our noses.”

“Does it have anything to do with what was written underneath that table?” He asks. He spent the latter portion of his day carefully painting over the graffiti, but he couldn’t block the rebellious words out of his memory.

“It has everything to do with that. She’s mentioned Kane a couple times in here—–”

“Get rid of it, Clarke.” His eyes are pleading, and he gently closes the book in her hands. He can see some fire within her, how her gaze is sharp and wild, her cheeks flushed from what must’ve been a hurried walk over. “If it’s even half as dangerous as those words under the table, that’ll land you in big trouble if anyone catches you with it. Even speaking about Kane is—–”

“Punishable, I know. But…” She hesitates, voice trailing off as her thumb begins to draw circles on the cover. “There’s more.”

“What do you mean, more?”

“Your mother’s name was Aurora, right?”

Bellamy’s brow furrows. “Yeah.”

“And how’d she die?”

“It was an accident, at the textile factory.” He mumbles this, feeling Clarke’s question dig up old pain that’s been carefully buried.

“Well, Becca didn’t quite agree with that.”

“I didn’t exactly agree with that either, but there’s nothing I could do.”

“No, I mean Becca didn’t believe the story.”

His face goes slack. “She said that?”

“Yes,” Clarke starts frantically flipping through. “She wrote it down here somewhere. Apparently there’s a whole bunch of people who died in ‘accidents’, but she never believed they were really
accidental. She thought… she actually thought someone was behind them all. That it was all calculated.”

Bellamy turns away, running a hand through his hair as the floor spins out from underneath him. His world seemed to be shifting out of his control. “So you’re telling me… that my mother was murdered? And the officials, the government… they covered it up?”

“That’s what Becca wrote.” He can hear Clarke swallow, pause, fumble with a page. “I think she worried that would happen to my dad.”

He whips around. “Clarke…”

“His death was a suicide, I know that. But Becca mentioned him several times. She wrote about ‘Jake’, and about things he was saying, or believing.”

“It could be anyone. Maybe another Jake.”

“I know my dad, Bellamy. I know how he’d think. Half the stuff Becca’s saying he believed, he used to tell me. It’s dangerous stuff, I know that. But,” She closes the journal, holding it tight between her fingers. “I’ve got so many questions, unanswered questions. And I can’t help but wonder – no, feel – that this book has the answers.”

“So what does it say, about your dad?”

“I don’t know. The last twenty pages or so, the most recent stuff, it’s all in code. Letters and symbols all jumbled together. There’s no key or anything, but I’m going to try to crack it.” Clarke draws her arms around her as a draft cuts through the warm room. Bellamy shivers. “It’s like the stakes were rising, or something. And Becca started writing in code because she was afraid of someone finding her journal, and that’s why whatever’s in this code has to be important.”

The room still spins slowly behind Clarke. Bellamy moves to the chair, turning it backwards and settling down to straddle it. He folds his hands under his chin. “So what are you going to do?”

“I need more information, for a start. Becca doesn’t have a home, at least not since she moved to the clinic. I don’t know if I can trust Alie, but it’s clear from her entries that Becca didn’t. So, the only other lead I’ve got is… the wall.”

“Don’t even think about it.”

“That’s the only other place I’ve seen Kane written, and with that symbol for the A.” Clarke flips to a page with the corner folded, and she turns the journal around for Bellamy to see. Sure enough, Kane is scrawled across in bold pen, with the odd-looking A. “I’m pretty sure it wasn’t Becca who sprayed that on the wall, but whoever did must be thinking like she was. Maybe there’s a clue, something to go off of.”

“What you’re talking about isn’t just some conspiracy theory. You’re talking about a full-blown rebellion movement. It’s treason.”

“But what if it’s true? What if all of it’s true?” Clarke’s eyes burn in a way that only ice can: stark and bright and brilliantly sharp. They’re beautiful to the point of being terrifying. “I can’t just walk away from something like this.”

Bellamy swallows, then nods. “Then you’re not doing this alone.”
**Love is Louder**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**Tell me the words**

*You long to hear*

*And I'll sing them loud and clear*

*Let me heal the wounds you've held on to for all these years*

*Break the cycle*

*Break the chains*

*Cause love is louder than all your pain*

-You+Me, “Break the Cycle”

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They choose a Sunday, because it is the only day of the week Bellamy has off. Clarke adjusts her schedule a few minutes at a time – moving a consultation here, a shift there – over a few days to avoid the attention. By the end of the week, she’s cleared her Sunday afternoon, and even Jackson doesn’t seem to take notice. In the time since Becca’s death, Clarke’s become even more of a workhorse than usual, taking long shifts that no one else wants and trimming time off her required breaks. It’s enough to make her mother fill with pride – and remain oblivious.

Clarke illustrates their route of travel, putting her art skills to good use with a dying pen on a piece of clinic stationary. She slips into the janitorial locker room during her break, checking carefully that it’s empty, and leaves it tucked in the locker labeled “B. Blake”. The only times they speak, they’re in deserted hallways or empty rooms. It would attract too much attention to do anything otherwise. They discuss where to meet, what to bring, what excuses to tell their family members when they inevitably ask where they’re going. They plan everything.

Clarke didn’t plan on the weather, though.

On her walk home Sunday afternoon, she notices the sky changing colors. Instead of the usual early-autumn sky with light gray clouds and patches of thin sunlight, the sky looks distinctly green. She can feel the moisture hanging in the air around her, clinging to her skin at the back of her neck. From the east, thick gray clouds move in aggressively, threatening to plunge afternoon into evening. Clarke shudders, drawing her light sweater closer to her. *Bring a jacket*, she makes a mental note, and quickens her pace.

When she reaches her empty home, she moves fast. She grabs a small polyester backpack from the
back of her door, filling it with a flashlight, a flippad and pen, a magnifying lens, and a small, Council-approved switchblade. She pulls a square of medical tarp from the closet in the bathroom, running it under the sink to check how waterproof the plastic is. The water settles on top in quivering beads. Good. Clarke dries it off on her pantsleg and wraps into around the journal. If there was one thing that couldn’t afford to get wet, it was that journal.

Clarke changes out of her day clothes into the toughest pieces of clothing she’s got: thick canvas winter pants, a heavy woolen sweater over a long-sleeved shirt, and clunky rubber boots. The standard-issue size is too big for her feet, but she doesn’t have the time to find something else. Remembering the clouds, Clarke grabs her black raincoat from the back of her closet and zips it over top. Standing inside in the humid heat, Clarke begins to sweat and feel much too warm. Either it’s the thousand layers, or the nerves.

Stopping in the kitchen, Clarke hastily scrawls the note she’s planned to leave her mother: *Out with Raven tonight, will be back by curfew. Love you. -C.* She’s already vaguely mentioned these false plans to her mother during last night’s dinner conversation, so Abby should think nothing of it. Clarke hopes.

Outside, the wind is starting to pick up. It lifts the tail of Clarke’s braid off her shoulder, and she tucks it back inside her jacket before stuffing her clammy hands deep inside her pockets. She keeps her head down and moves fast, off the beaten path. Luckily, with the ominous sky overhead, no one seems that interested in a bundled-up blonde speed-walking down the path.

She sees Bellamy at their meeting place: behind the old schoolbuilding. He’s dressed all in black, leaning against the brick and standing in shadow.

“What took you so long, Princess?”

“Please,” she rolls her eyes. “Some of us didn’t have the day off.”

“Anytime you’d like to trade jobs, please, just ask. I’d gladly take your shifts over mine.” He grumbles, folding his arms across his chest. “You have… it?”

“Wrapped in a thick layer of plastic. It’s safe.”

“Good.” He glances up. “From the looks of things, we won’t have much time before the sky gets dark.”

“Then let’s get moving.” Clarke shrugs at the path, and they begin walking. They fall into a comfortable, brisk pace next to each other, steps falling in tandem. Oddly enough, most of the panicking butterflies in Clarke’s stomach have seemed to calm down with Bellamy around. Heat rises to her cheeks. She already trusts him a hell of a lot more than she really should.

Then Clarke feels the first raindrop. It’s small and unobtrusive, falling gently to rest on her cheek. Bellamy notices the drizzle too, looking upwards.

“Shit, Clarke, the sky doesn’t look good.”

She glances over his light, worn coat. “You should’ve brought a better jacket.”

“Don’t have one.”

Her stomach feels hollow. “I didn’t mean--- You should have told me. I could’ve brought you one.”

“From where?” He raises a skeptical brow.
Clarke knows exactly where to get one. She can picture it: dark gray and familiar, with that scratchy sound it makes when you swing your arms, and the endless pockets to hide away little treats. “My dad’s old one.” She suddenly becomes uncomfortable at the fact she’s brought this up, or the fact that she has extra of something when others have so little. “We had to turn in most of his things when he… you know. But some things were… harder to let go of than others.”

She notices Bellamy watching her from the side of his eye. His face is unusually softened, brows gentler than their typical furrow. “I’ll be fine, without a jacket. It’s okay.”

She nods mutely, glad to bring that conversation to a close. The silence between them is anything but empty, but it’s oddly comfortable.

Octavia knocks on the back window, like she always does when she goes to find Raven. Her hair whips around her face.

Raven’s face appears dimly at first, growing in clarity as she approaches the glass. Sliding her hands along the latch, she pops the window open. “Octavia, I didn’t know you were coming over.”

Octavia notices the flush of color along Raven’s smiling face, and – of course – Finn in the background smirking like a guilty idiot. Great, I’m interrupting. But Raven’s always had an open-door policy with Octavia, and vice versa. “I just… I’m home alone, and with the wind and everything it felt too… empty.” She doesn’t mention how she can feel the dampness leaking through holes in the patchy roof, or how the walls tremble and sway inches in the gusts. “Is it alright if I crash here, for a little while?”

“Yeah, of course.” Raven steps aside, letting Octavia slide in through the window.

“Thanks,” she says, at Raven and at Finn. It’s his house, after all.

“Where’s Bellamy? I thought he takes Sundays off.”

“He usually does. But he said something about filling in for a coworker and taking an extra shift.” Octavia rubs her temples. “I don’t remember, I sure he had a reason. I just wasn’t really… listening.”

“How nice of you to listen to your big brother.” Finn says.

“Shut up, Collins.” Raven and Finn have been a thing for as long as Octavia can remember. While she hasn’t always trusted Finn, he’s grown on her. He’s her best friend’s boyfriend, and she trusts Raven’s judgment. “You’re an only child, you wouldn’t understand.”

The wind swells up and blows a spattering of raindrops hard against the windowpane. Raven’s head whips around. “I knew we were due for a storm. It’s always this time of year.”

“I heard them talking about it at the hydro plant, something reading funny on the scanners.” Finn says.

Octavia swallows thickly. She’s never minded a little rain or thunder, but – even as a child – she’s hated big storms. Her pre-Arkadia memories are few and far-between, but she remembers weeks of
trekking through unbelievably awful weather, nights of chills running deep to her bones, the feeling of never getting dry or warming up… She forces the memories away. “It’s nicer here. The walls don’t move with the wind or leak rain.”

Finn and Raven are silent but Octavia knows they heard her. The Collins’s aren’t wealthy by any standards, but they’re above the poverty line where most Hearts rest. They’re lucky. Finn offers a sympathetic halfway-smile. “Stay here until the storm’s over. And at least your brother works indoors, right?”

The rain has gone from a light mist to fat drops, hanging off Bellamy’s curly hair in beads. As he walks, they shake and fall into his eyes. Honestly, he’d love a nice jacket. One with a good hood and a proper liner. Like he has the extra credits to spend on something like that. Instead, he tries to focus on the faint trail in front of him and ignore the wetness settling in his old boots. The squelching sounds he makes when he steps on the dampened soil. “How much further?”

Clarke moves fast, undeterred by the rain. “Not much. It was just beyond the climbing trees. Of course, we were up in the trees when we saw the graffiti, so it’s a little different.”

Bellamy looks at the trees around them, noticing the water running down their trunks. “Is it a good idea to be climbing in these conditions?”

“We won’t be. We need to get as close to the wall as possible to look for clues.”

“And with any luck, the guards will be a little more distracted today. Maybe this weather might actually work in our favor.”

“I hope so. Either way, we’ll have to move fast and stay low.” The cloudy skies overhead make everything prematurely darker, so the shadows are elongated and thick in the forest. That should help hide them. Suddenly, Clarke stops, listening.

Bellamy’s hand flinches towards his waistband pocket, where he’s stashed the closest thing to a weapon he’s allowed to own – a kitchen knife. He watches Clarke from behind, seeing her shoulders tense as she stands absolutely frozen. Then, she breathes in a whisper, “Clear. No guards?”

“We’re here?” Bellamy can’t even see the wall in the dim light.

Clarke points. “Just up ahead.” Her voice is little more than an exhale. Bellamy takes a slow step forward, glad the damp ground muffles the sound of his footsteps. Then, the darkness ahead takes shape, solidifying into an enormous expanse of concrete. Pushing through the undergrowth, he follows Clarke to the base. It’s only a few paces ahead now. His eyes adjust to the low light, taking in the little cracks and imperfections in the cement. The wall must be at least thirty feet tall, and he notices the wide coils of barbed wire silhouetted against the green churning sky. It’s not just oppressive, it’s terrifying up close.

His eyes drift downwards, settling on a wide patch that’s a slightly different color than the rest of the wall. Reaching a careful hand out, his fingertips brush the concrete. He’s not sure what he expects – perhaps to be zapped back in the air by some magical force field – but nothing happens. Instead, he can feel the almost-rubbery texture of new paint over stone. “It was here, wasn’t it?”
Clarke appraises the patch, eyes squinting. “About there, I think. Seems the right size.”

Bellamy begins to examine the area around the patch, rifling his finger through the dirt and swiping them along the base of the wall, looking for anything unfamiliar – a button, pocket junk, anything. There are a few fallen leaves with bright red splotches dripped onto them, droplets of paint from the letters on the wall. But other than that, nothing out of the ordinary. “Anything?”

“No,” Clarke groans, digging through brush and leaves and dirt. She backs up a little, scanning the tree trunks nearby for clues. When her face briefly catches the light, he sees her and she looks wild. Desperate.

Above them, a noise cuts through the wind: human voices. They both freeze at the sound. Even dressed in dark clothes, they could stand out. The voices seem far away, but it’s impossible to gauge from the ground. Bellamy whispers, “We have to go, Clarke.”

“No,” she shakes her head. “There has to be something, anything. Maybe --- maybe some light will--” She reaches for her bag and the flashlight inside.

Bellamy lunges for her wrist, grabbing hold. “We need to go. They’ll see us.”

The desperation on her face is palpable, filling her eyes with a quivering ring of tears. She sputters, turning back towards the wall, and she flinches at the way the guards’ voices are growing louder. Finally, Bellamy sees the defeat collapse in her expression, features crumpling into a furrowed brow and frown. He tugs at her arm and she follows him.

They tear into the underbrush, thankful for an ominous rumble of thunder overhead that covers their loud footsteps. Bellamy holds onto Clarke, fearing she’ll turn around to go back, and they stumble through the forest together in an awkward sprint. As the canopy overhead begins to thin, the deluge becomes stronger. It isn’t long before Bellamy’s ebony curls are plastered down onto his forehead, the ends brushing his brow and hanging into his vision. His boots are soaked and squelching, and if he paused for even a moment he might realize how cold the air had become. A low-hanging branch swats him in the face as he passes, slicing a stinging line under his eye. He hisses, but keeps going.

They reach the edge of the forest and notice the sky is no lighter in the open space than it was through the dense trees. Enormous clouds churn above, and a harsh wind sends the diagonal raindrops careening into their faces. Bellamy turns around, finding Clarke just behind him. She’s a shrunked caricature of herself, her wet clothes glued tight to her body. Darkened, dampened strands of her blond hair swirl around her head like they’ve got minds of their own, and her eyes look too big for her face. She’s trembling, and Bellamy realizes he is too.

“We need to get out of this storm.” He says, pointing out the obvious. Saying it out loud makes him feel like he has a plan, when really he doesn’t. They stand at the edge of a wide expanse, filled with farming fields: the agricultural district. In the distance, he can make out the fuzzy silhouette of some barnhouses, but he can’t see the town through the thick rain. He spins, looking for any familiar landmark. Okay, he tells himself, the agricultural district is on the eastern side. I live on the southeastern side of town... He points into the distance. “We’ll aim for my house. That’s probably closer than yours, if we’re by the farms.”

Clarke nods, drawing her arms around her body. “Okay. How quickly do you think we can make it there?”

“I don’t know, in this weather. But let’s just keep moving. It’ll keep us warm.” And distracted. He tries not to think of the last storm he and Octavia faced, when the wind tore boards off the back of their house and let in inches of rainwater. He tried not to think about the patchwork roof, and the
invisible leaks that inevitably appeared every rainstorm.

Bellamy waits for Clarke to join him at his side, then they begin walking. Somehow, the downpour seems to thicken, and the wind is relentless. It’s too early in the season for it to feel this cold, and the dampness doesn’t help. They don’t bother sticking to the outskirts; they can’t see much more than fifteen yards ahead of them. The sun has disappeared in the sky, leaving the landscape washed in a grayish fog. Every dozen steps or so, Bellamy turns to make sure Clarke’s still with him. They move slow, hindered by the marshy ground and awful wind. He’s walking in a hunch, shoulders up and head low. Still, the wind hits him like some relentless beast. Twice Clarke trips, and Bellamy’s breath catches in his throat as he lunges to grab her. On the second stumble, she’s coated in mud from the waist down. He can feel her trembling in her arms, and it’s bad.

He reels around, looking for some miracle. “We need to find shelter now.”

Clarke shakes her head. “I’m fine. Let’s keep going.”

“We’re nowhere close to the edge of town yet. At this rate it’ll be hours before we reach the house, and that’s if we even make it in one piece.”

“We’ll be fine—”

“Clarke, you’re freezing.”

She shakes no, but her chattering teeth betray her. Bellamy shields his eyes with his hand, squinting at a rectangular blob off in the distance. “There.”

Clarke capitulates and nods, and they trudge through with determination. The blob becomes larger and gains definition, materializing into a worn barnhouse. The paint is peeling something awful and the unlocked shutters around the upper windows flap like crazy in the wind. But it looks dark and dry, and Bellamy’s praying to anyone above that it’s empty. After pushing their way through inches-deep mud, they collapse against the barn doors. Clarke heaves, head rolling back onto the rough wood, while Bellamy fiddles with the handle and pulls.

A lone boy walks down the deserted street, bracing himself against the rain and wind. He’s got his hood pulled down over his face, and he’s wearing as many layers as he could fit on. He knows he should be indoors in weather like this, knows he should go home and wait it out, wait it out until he turns nineteen and can get a place of his own…

But John Murphy’s had enough of this bullshit for a while.

As he walks, steps persistent but eyes vacant, those last words from his mother rattle around in his brain like marbles in an empty vase. He can’t think of them without picturing her, a strung-out mess, skin puffy and pasty, eyes bloodshot and slurring mouth sneering at him.

Useless.

She called him useless. While she sat around, pissing away any of the handouts they’d received since Murphy’s father got himself arrested. She sat around, turning money into liquor and drinking
anything she could get her hands on, and holding out the empty hope that her husband might one day be released from prison. That he’d come home.

She told Murphy this insistently, clutching the half-empty bottle like it was Alex himself, her words sloshing together. It wasn’t love in her red-rimmed eyes; it was something more extreme. An obsession. When her son, her only son, tried to pry the bottle from her grimy fingers, she held tight and clawed at him with her other hand. Clawed at him, like an animal. Murphy doesn’t need to touch his face to feel the burn of the scratches along his left cheek.

“He’s dead.” Murphy had told her, giving up on the bottle and grabbing her flailing wrists instead. He didn’t know if the words were true; he still doesn’t. Perhaps Alex Murphy is still alive, sitting at the back of some prison cell, serving years for stealing expensive medicine. He’d never had a trial. He was certainly supposed to, but it kept getting pushed back and postponed until all but Virginia Murphy stopped asking when. And her questions were never taken seriously anyways. She was a Heart, and she was a drunk, even then.

Murphy kicks a loose stone on the path, sending it scattering into a muddy puddle. “He’s dead, and he’s not coming back for you. For us.” He’d wanted, needed her to see the truth. To just once, put down the bottle and see the world for what it was. Or, at least for the next ten months, until he could move out.

That’s when she slipped out of his grasp, sending the bottle shattering into an explosion on the floor. The scary part was she didn’t even notice. No, her filthy hand grasped the bottom of his chin, forcing him to look at her. Her nails dug the delicate skin above his neck, and he was paralyzed, shocked that she’d touch him in such a way and terrified to move.

And John Murphy doesn’t scare easily.

“Why would he come back for you?” She spat in his face. “When it was your fault he was arrested in the first place. Stealing medicine for you. A little brat, who never gave half a shit about anything or anyone. A useless waste of space. He traded his freedom for your life, but look at you.” Her breath was hot and putrid against his face. “You’re not worth it.”

Not worth it.

None of this was worth that. Murphy tried to tell himself that was just the alcohol talking, that she didn’t mean anything in those empty, angry words. But the truth was, he couldn’t remember her sober enough to know what she was really like. It was like the real Virginia Murphy had died years ago – even before his father’s arrest – and she’d been replaced by some awful creature that lived and breathed hate.

So he left.

He grabbed as much clothing as he could, throwing it on in layers. He picked up a bag and threw what little food they had in it; that witch could find her own food, for all he cared. In the last cabinet, he found her stash: four tall bottles, each filled with some grimy, murky liquid that he hated. One look in his mother’s direction, and he knew what to do with them. He grabbed the first bottle and hurled it against the wall. It erupted like a firework, the glass shattering and leaving behind a long dark stain. He did the same with the remaining three bottles, ignoring the cries and curses coming from the woman on the floor.

If she wanted a fix that badly, she could lap it up from the floorboards like the animal she’d become.

The rain and wind should sting him, should chill him to his bones, but Murphy walks numbly. He
has a vague idea of where he’s going: ever since his mother started getting bad, he’s been thinking about it. Thinking about a way to end this shitty existence, to find a do-over. He’s heard all of the stories, whispered in the bowels of the most impoverished side of Arkadia, of how to escape this wretched place with the hope of finding somewhere better. Anywhere had to be better than here.

The wall was too obvious; any idiot with half an idea of escaping would aim for the wall. No one would even think of the dam.

When Bellamy pulls the door open, the first thing that hits him is the stench of hay and animals and barn. He really can’t complain, though. The air feels a notch warmer inside than out, and though he feels a draft from the open windows on the second layer, the boards making up the wall seem to be keeping out most of the wind. He waits for Clarke to enter first, a cautionary hand on the small of her back, before stepping inside and shutting the door behind them.

Outside, the wind roars like a beast. “Anyone there?” Bellamy calls out into the shadowy barn. It’s not that large for a building of its kind, but it’s significantly larger than the house he shares with Octavia. His eyes adjust slowly, and the dark shadows take shape as livestock stalls and hay bales. Each stall he passes seems to be empty, and they’ve yet to see or hear another human. “I think we’re clear.”

Up above in the hayloft, the wind tosses the shutters and sends them thudding into the side of the wall. Bellamy flinches at the sound, Clarke jumps.

“I’ll go lock those,” he says, eyes scanning for steps or a ladder.

Clarke nods. “I’ll look for a lantern or something.” She rummages through her soaked pack, and he assumes she’s looking for her flashlight. There’s something in her hand that she’s shaking furiously, and finally the thin tinny light sprays from the device.

Bellamy finds a ladder, careful to test each wrung before putting his full weight on it. Standing on the hayloft, he can feel the wood boards creak and groan under his feet. He moves quickly to the first window. The rain splatters his face aggressively, but he finds the latch on the shutters and locks them. He does the same for the next two, exhaling in relief when the stormy sounds fade to only the incessant drone of the outside wind.

He hears the strike of a match, and Clarke’s lit an old oil lantern. She grins weakly at him from below. “I didn’t know they still had these in circulation. Lanterns like these are practically ancient.”

“We’re lucky it’s here. Those solar-powered ones they try to push wouldn’t do us a lot of good right now.” He climbs down and finds her sitting against a latched stall door, the lantern at her feet. She’s still drenched from the rain outside, and the light from the lantern plays off the rain droplets on her face and hair. “See any blankets or anything?”

Her eyes flick across the barn. “I’ll look,” she moves to rise, but he stops her with an open palm.

“I got it.” She looks exhausted. Instead, Bellamy picks up the small flashlight from her side and checks out the back of the barn, pulling open the rusty cabinet doors. Most of the shelves are empty, but he finds a few things pushed to the back: a tin canister of old oats, some well-worn spare
horseshoes, an empty oil can, and one musty blanket. He checks twice, hoping for another blanket or something to keep himself warm. But there’s only one, dingy and stiff with age.

“Found one,” he calls out, shaking it out as he walks back to her. She’s hunched over, her hair loose from her braid as she wrings out the dripping strands. Her raincoat hangs behind her, presumably to dry off and warm a little by the lantern, and he notices that her wool sweater is soaked all the way through. It clings to her every curve. “Here, warm up a little.”

“Thanks.” Clarke accepts it gratefully, then hesitates as she looks down at her pants. They’re drenched in rain and mud. “Dammit.”

Bellamy fumbles for an idea. “I can… try to find something to wipe them off with…?”

Clarke bites her lip, thinking, then gives up. She tugs at the waistband of her pants and slides them off. Bellamy quickly looks away out of respect, heat rising in his cheeks at the sight of her panties and bare legs. She could’ve at least given me some warning.

“Maybe we can start a fire?” Clarke asks nonchalantly as she wraps the blanket around her waist and hangs her wet pants next to her coat to dry.

He swallows and nods, walking away to pull dry hay. He needs to get himself in check. He’s a mature adult, the glimpse of a woman’s – a girl’s – panties shouldn’t send him spinning undone. Not when they’re both currently camped out in a barn in the middle of a hurricane, and somehow dragged into a web of conspiracy theories and rebel activities. He should have plenty of other things to worry about than Clarke Griffin’s legs.

And it’s just Clarke, he reminds himself. Arkadia’s princess, Octavia’s classmate. An ally, maybe even a friend at this point. Besides, even if he was looking at Clarke that way, he’s no idiot. He knows the unspoken rules, he sees the invisible line carved between people like Clarke and people like him. Between Heads and Hearts.

Hell, who am I kidding? It’s not a line, it’s a wall.

Bellamy returns with an old metal basin and a dry bale of hay, which they torch using a lick of flame from the lantern. Immediately the air around them becomes warmer, and the basin fire throws orange light and shadows against the walls. Clarke sits with her knees hugged to her chest, blanket wrapped over her curled body.

“Good thing we’ve got plenty of hay to last us. I don’t think we’ll be going anywhere tonight.” He says.

Clarke shakes her head, agreeing. Her jaw is clenched tight to stop the chattering.

“Clarke.”

“Huh?” She lifts her head.

“Your lips are blue.”

She raises a slow hand to prod her lips, fingertips pruned and pale. “Ar-r-re they? Huh.”

Bellamy is restless. “There’s got to be a faster way to get you warmed up.” He stands, paces a little. “Do you want your jacket? Your jeans?”

“Theyr-r-e t-t-too wet,” she stammers, her teeth clacking. She inches right alongside the basin, toes
on the metal sides.

A nasty gust of wind batters the walls of the barn and send a chill racing down Bellamy’s spine – not from the cold, but from the ferocity of the storm. He wipes the plastered-down curls from his eyes. He’s cold, sure – he’s goddamn freezing, actually – but not nearly as bad as Clarke. Having half an idea, he sheds his useless soaked jacket, hanging it next to hers, and sits down beside her. He moves closer until their sides are pressed flush against each other.

Automatically, instinctively, Clarke curls inwards towards him, turning her chin to rest in the crook of his shoulder. He can feel her shivers rack his own body, the tremors in her jaw vibrating along his collarbone. He wraps his arms around her shoulders, pulling her tighter to him. She’s practically in his lap at this point, curled like a child in his embrace, drawn to his body warmth.

Slowly, and without really noticing, Bellamy finds himself curling into her. His head pulls towards hers until his chin rests in her wet curls. He can smell her shampoo, something light and softly floral. The tendrils of her hair tickle his exposed chin along his collar, and he can feel little droplets of water trickle off them and slide down his shirt, leaving little icy trails down his chest.

They sit in silence for what might be minutes, or what might be hours. The only sound between them is the incessant howl of the wind and the crackle of the burning hay. They breath the same air, tucked away in a little corner of quiet and tranquility in an otherwise hellish night. They are comfortable, sitting in silence and listening to the steady tempo of their breaths or, faintly, the dull beat of the other person’s heart.

Bellamy shifts his head downwards just slightly to look at Clarke. She’s got her eyes closed and her face slack, the dusting of a flush on her lips and cheeks. He’s convince she’s fallen asleep when she breaks the silence with a quiet voice.

“Tell me a story, Bellamy.”

Something deep in his stomach clenches, and he exhales a slow breath. His mind spins back to life. “Do you know about the constellations?”

He feels her shake her head no into his shoulder.

“My mother taught them to me, many years ago. Her favorite was Orion, the hunter.” He keeps his voice low and steady, the way he used to speak when telling a young Octavia stories before bed. Before he can stop himself, he’s explaining all about Orion and Taurus, Andromeda, Cassiopeia and Ursa Major. Every so often he’d pause during his storytelling, and he’d feel Clarke’s breath suspend in anticipation until he continued. He notices her teeth aren’t chattering anymore.

He’s about to mention the Hercules constellation when she speaks again. “Tell me a story about you.”

Bellamy’s eyes widen, stinging as he stares into the fire. He never really talks about himself, or his past. Octavia knows most of his life story, and she doesn’t bother asking about the moments she can’t remember or wasn’t a part of. No one, not even the friends he’s made over the years, has ever pressed about his personal life. Besides, his life began when he came to Arkadia. Even though he knows that’s not at all true.

“Before I came to Arkadia, my mom and I lived south of here.” The words feel foreign on his tongue, but he doesn’t want to stop. “We lived in the bottom of a shelled-out building. And we hid, all the time really. There were a few other survivors who lived nearby in the ruins around us, and
they stuck to themselves mostly. Sometimes we would trade with them, or my mother would share stories with them. There were lookouts who traded watches, keeping an eye out for the riders who would crash into our settlement every few weeks or so. One of the first things I remember my mother teaching me was to hide when the riders came.”

In the flickers of the fire, Bellamy gets lost in a memory. He’s not in the barn with Clarke, he’s crouched behind a crooked bureau in their small bedroom, listening to the grumble of engines and the barking voices that belonged to the riders. He can smell them as they pass by the broken window, smell their sweat and smoke and fuel exhaust. He would stay hiding until they left, sometimes for hours.

“I don’t know what they were looking for, but they always came looking for something. We didn’t have any money or valuables, we barely had enough food to get by.”

He remembers his mother’s wavering voice, trying to stay strong as she argued with one of the riders. He can still hear the stinging crack of a hand across his mother’s face. She wouldn’t cry out.

“My mother tried to show me what bravery was. Even when she had a baby, a baby she wasn’t expecting to have at all. My sister. When she had Octavia, everything became more serious. I could feel it. She wanted to protect me, of course, but she wanted to hide Octavia.”

Of course, as a child Bellamy couldn’t have known the significance of his pregnant mother and the fear she felt for her second child. As a grown man, a part of him ached to find the bastard who fathered Octavia and give him the hellish end he deserved.

“She was always afraid someone would come for her, to take her away. One day, she just snapped. She decided we needed to run. We left in the middle of the night, using a map someone had drawn on a scrap of fabric and given to my mother. When I asked where we were going, she simply said ‘somewhere better’.”

She meant Arkadia.

“We walked until our feet were swollen and aching. Octavia wasn’t even four years old, and she tried to keep up. I carried her as much as I could. It took us weeks, maybe a month or two. I lost count.” He’s drifted into the memory of it. “I remember seeing the wall, seeing it through the trees and hearing the cries of the scouts and I was terrified. But my mother grabbed my hand and squeezed it and told me we were going to be safe. And I... I believed her.”

His voice fades. Some nights, when he’s struggling to sleep with the grumbles of an empty stomach or an aching overworked back, he wonders if he and Octavia would’ve made off better outside of the wall. If they could’ve survived – even maybe *thrive* – in that strange abstract world of anarchy and unknown. If his mother would’ve survived.

Arkadia officials say there’s nothing beyond the walls but wasteland and chaos. That Arkadia is the only little haven of peace in a world without hope. He’s not so sure he believes that.

Bellamy returns to the present, remembering Clarke curled up into him, listening. He shifts a little, clears his throat. “Sorry. Not a very exciting story. Or a happy one.”

He almost doesn’t hear her speak. “But it’s *real.*”
Author’s Note:

Hi friends,

A million apologies for the delay in the getting this chapter up and published. My life has changed considerably since last publishing (eh hem, thanks to starting college), and I hit a pretty awful writing slump. I’ve been trying to finish this chapter for MONTHS and I couldn’t do it. It wasn’t for lack of inspiration or direction – I think it was a lack of certainty and normalcy in my own life that was getting to me. And that was really frustrating, because I wanted to write, desperately. I felt like I had so many thoughts and ideas bottled up inside of me, but I couldn’t get them onto the page. Ugh.

Anyways, I’m back. I don’t know how frequently I’ll be able to update, but I’m human and I’ll try my best. I’m excited for season 4 and some new material to draw inspiration from! (Tangent: I went to the Unity Days con in Vancouver and I met a whole bunch of faves including BOB and LINDSEY and RICHARD and omg it was amazing!! That’s what got me to finally buckle down and finish this chapter.)

I really hope you’ve enjoyed this latest chapter.Honestly, it’s the idea that people have an actual interest in my work that keeps me motivated and writing fanfics. I hate to try and ask for anything, but I’d love to hear what you think of this chapter and H&H so far. Seriously, I appreciate every kind note from the bottom of my heart.

With love and many apologies,
-K.T.
Bellamy hears whispers about it on his way to work the next morning. Usually, he does his best to keep his head down and profile low when he’s out and about, but he hasn’t even left his street before noticing how people are talking. They speak in quiet, somber tones about a boy who was out in the storm last night. For a moment, Bellamy’s blood freezes. Was he spotted at the wall? Was he not as careful in the storm as he’d thought he was? What about Clarke?

But of course that couldn’t be the case. If he was really in trouble, a unit of Arkadia guards would’ve taken him in the middle of the night. They wouldn’t bother waiting until morning.

As Octavia walks alongside next to him, he can tell she’s actively listening for the gossip. He sees it in the way her brow furrows and her jaw is tilted, ear up and panning for information. “Bell, what are they talking about?”

“I don’t know.” He knows – he hopes – that the whispers had nothing to do with him, but he still feels guilty. As far as Octavia heard, he’d taken an extra shift last night and had been working during the storm, not sleuthing along the wall. He hates keeping things from her, but it is too complicated. There were so many details that they hadn’t worked out yet, and he doesn’t need Octavia getting involved when he isn’t sure how dangerous things could get. The last thing he wants is to accidentally encourage her to start sleuthing around herself.

Or to involve Clarke.

With Octavia’s new packing job, the path to warehouse H takes her towards the center of town. Bellamy likes to walk with her before turning eastward towards the hospital. This morning they walk in silence, which Bellamy prefers to spitting out more lies. He’s lost in his own thoughts when Octavia tugs on his shoulder and points behind him, towards the road leading to City Center. It’s surprisingly crowded for this early in the morning.

“I’m going to see what’s going on.” Octavia decides, turning down the road and leaving Bellamy to follow.

City Center is full and alive, with a large crowd gathered at the steps of the administrative building. This is not normal. In between the building’s tall stone columns, Bellamy spots a dark-haired woman calmly standing in front of a microphone. Even though she wears recycled, desaturated clothing like all Arkadians, her blazer and pencil skirt are crisp and in pristine condition. She even wears high
heels, a rare luxury within Arkadia. She’s clearly a councilwoman.

When she speaks in to the microphone, her voice is clear and full of authority. A name leaps into Bellamy’s mind: Lorelei Tsing, Head.

“I’m sure you’ve heard many different rumors this morning,” Tsing begins, “So allow me to disclose the truth and put these to rest. In the aftermath of yesterday’s storm, emergency teams have been deployed to safely restore any damages done to residential and commercial neighborhoods. Medical teams are already seeing to any civilians who were injured in the storm and provisional supplies will be issued to individuals who lost them, under the jurisdiction of the Council’s emergency subcommittees.”

This was all normal storm procedure, which still didn’t explain the crowd or the whispers.

“As of this morning’s latest report, there has only been one casualty in this storm.” Tsing continues, and the crowd hushes. It’s not often that storms like these turn deadly, not in Arkadia. “John Murphy, age 18, drowned last night at the hydroelectric dam.”

Bellamy notices Octavia’s quick intake of breath. Murphy was her – for lack of a better term – friend. In a strange sort of way. Her jaw slackens, then tightens with a snap as Tsing continues.

“Murphy’s family has been notified, and while his body could not be recovered in the storm, surveillance footage from the dam was able to confirm his identity. Nonetheless, our hydroelectric crews have been working tirelessly to recover his remains.”

Remains. Bellamy shudders. Back when he was in school, they’d toured the dam facility and he’s heard the powerful turbines. No, he’d felt the turbines rattling his bones and teeth. If someone had fallen into the waters and somehow gotten caught by the turbines, he couldn’t imagine the damage it would do to a human body.

Tsing continues, her voice carrying just the right amount of appropriate – yet feigned – sadness. “The loss of a young person in our community is truly a tragedy, and I know all Arkadians extend their sympathy towards the late Mr. Murphy’s family.” She takes a pause, holding the crowd’s attention. “However, in light of this recent tragedy let me remind my fellow Arkadians, on behalf of the Council, of the importance of avoiding restricted areas. Our community is full of facilities, such as the hydroelectric dam, that are dangerous for unauthorized personnel to explore.”

Bellamy’s blood runs cold. He half expects Tsing to mention the wall, or make direct eye contact with him. Icy fingers whisper down his spine, menacing and taunting.

“So long as all citizens abide by the warnings and limitations posted, we can keep everyone safe from risk or harm.” Tsing finishes with a smile that is too painted, too fabricated than would’ve been decent for such an announcement. She transitions to more notices about the cleanup effort, but it is clear she’s lost the attention of much of the whispering crowd, including Octavia.

“Why the hell would Murphy be at the dam?” Octavia hisses to Bellamy, fighting to keep her voice from wavering. “He was an idiot but not that much of an idiot. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“I don’t know, O.” Bellamy steers her out of the crowd towards the empty streets. “Let’s face it: Murphy liked to push back. He would do things or go places he wasn’t allowed to go. Maybe he saw the dam as his next big target.”

“In a storm? That’s a dumbass move and even he wouldn’t have tried that.” Octavia blinks rapidly.

“You heard what Tsing said. They identified him on the surveillance footage, they know it was
“But she didn’t say anything about what he was doing,” Octavia said. “And why would he go alone? I know Murphy, and he wouldn’t pull stunts unless he had friends there to see that it happen. Mbege or Atom. If they were there at the dam, don’t you think Tsing would’ve mentioned them?”

“Maybe.”

“She would’ve at least said he didn’t go alone, or she would’ve made a point of punishing anyone else who got caught - use it as a fear tactic.” Octavia glares intently at the paving stones as they walk. “But he went alone, to the dam in the middle of a storm. And they couldn’t find his body… What if he escaped?”

Bellamy reaches for Octavia’s forearm and pulls her to a stop. In a voice just above a breath, he whispers, “You can’t go saying things like that, O.”

“You have to admit, it would make sense. They don’t have a body, Bell. That means he could still be alive.”

“Or he could be ripped to pieces at the bottom of the dam outflow. I don’t want to know the grisly details.”

“It adds up, and I think the Council knows that. That’s why they’re drilling home this message about staying out of unauthorized zones. Keep people from risking it.”

“And if the Council believes that’s what happens, then they’ve probably ramped up general surveillance and just talking about escaping is a hell of a lot more dangerous now.” He steps into a small alley behind a metalworking facility, Octavia with him. “O, if they come for you and see your shoulder, see the healing bullet wound, they’ll put the pieces together. They’ll know that you’ve done something bad enough to warrant someone shooting at you, and they won’t bother with a trial to see if you’re innocent or not. I don’t want you to just… disappear like that.”

“They can’t listen to every conversation across Arkadia at every single minute,” Octavia insists. “I know what I pulled with the tattoo was stupid, but I’ll be more careful. And I don’t care if it’s taboo or risky or even illegal, but I can’t stop questioning Murphy’s disappearance and I can’t stop wondering if there’s a way to get beyond the wall.”

Bellamy watches his sister, her face full of just as much stubbornness as he knew he had. And even though all of this is risky, he can’t help but feel a flicker of pride at her words.

Maybe she doesn’t have a reason to be there, but Clarke finds herself at Bellamy’s door again that night.

It’s not nearly as late as the last time she came. She leaves after eating a lonely dinner at home, and it’s not late enough to attract unwanted attention. Still, she’s careful to walk discreetly to Bellamy’s neighborhood, keeping her head lowered and a hood over her golden hair. She follows the steady stream of workers heading home for the evening, mentally recalling that Bellamy’s shift ended a little earlier today and hoping that he’ll be home.

She’s lucky when he opens the door for her. Naturally, it’s not without a snarky grumble. “Should I just get you a key to our house, Princess? Maybe make you your own special door in the back?”

“Shut up,” she answers, passing through the doorway. Despite his outward reluctance, she can see something in his smiling eyes that says he’s glad – even thankful – that she came unannounced.
And though she’s loath to admit it, but this tiny, rundown house feels about a hundred times more comfortable than the empty one she just left.

Octavia’s head pops up from the table and she groans, “Again? Hi Clarke.” She gives a quick wave, then pulls herself to her feet. “I’ll go to the bedroom.”

Clarke starts, “You don’t have to—-”

“Better than you two holing up in there.” Octavia shuts the door and her insinuating comment brings heat to Clarke’s cheeks.

She addresses Bellamy in a low voice. “How much does she know?”

“About the storm? Nothing. I was working that night.”

“Good.” For the first time in Bellamy’s house, Clarke feels awkward. Out of place. It’s different from the last time she was here, when she blazed in with the journal in her hands and desperation coursing through her veins. Now, she’s here because… because she wants to be.

“Thank you,” she says in a rush. “For… for staying with me during the storm.”

Confusion flickers across Bellamy’s face. “Did you think I was just going to leave you?”

“You didn’t have to stay.”

“Where was I going to go?”

“You didn’t have to say, but you did. You took care of me. I suppose I owe you one.” The corner of her lip tugs up. “Or maybe, after Octavia, now we’re even.”

“It doesn’t have to be about getting even, Clarke.” He speaks with a strange shade in his voice. It’s shy. “You were freezing and so was I and I couldn’t exactly just walk away, so I wanted to make sure you were okay. You don’t owe me anything.”

“I don’t really remember much of that night, to be honest. Just bits and pieces.” And Clarke is honest, but she doesn’t tell him what pieces. The flickers of images and sensations: the unrelenting rain and the bone-reaching chill afterwards; the scratch of the musty barn blanket against the gentle touch of Bellamy’s calloused hands; his wide dark eyes as they inspected her for harm; his body pressed against hers as he told her stories about the sky and the stars. And his past.

They are small moments, like a stack of printed photographs she can rifle through in her mind. The wash of relief over Bellamy’s face when the rain started to lessen. His sturdy hold on her ribcage as they finally crept out of the barn and towards town. And the reluctance, the sheer reluctance on his face while they stood at the end of her street as she insisted she could make it to the door on her own. His reluctance to leave.

To leave her?

Clarke is certain some of it has to be exaggerated, her half-conscious brain muddling the memories into something more poetic, more romantic. This is Bellamy, after all.

“It was a mess,” Bellamy says, keeping his response short. Clarke feels there’s more to be said, but the hint of a smile on Bellamy’s face says he accepts her thanks. Then he speaks again. “Did you hear about John Murphy?”
Clarke is grateful to talk about something else. “Yeah, I heard at the clinic this morning. They were guessing it was a suicide, by jumping into the dam waters.”

“Tsing didn’t say that at City Center. Wouldn’t surprise me if you had more accurate information though, she seemed pretty tight-lipped and keen on feeding us a very specific story.”

“That sounds like Tsing.” Clarke slumps into one of the worn kitchen chairs, feeling it totter a little on uneven legs. “I didn’t know John Murphy very well – I’ll be honest I tended to try and avoid him. But no one deserves an end like that.”

“Well,” Bellamy sits in the other chair. “Octavia seems to believe that he’s not actually dead.”

“What?”

“She thinks that somehow he… escaped.”

“Past the wall? Is that even possible?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. I’m not an expert on the dam setup. But she’s got the idea into her head because---”

“Because they couldn’t find the body.” Clarke finishes his sentence, piecing the information together for herself. “Of course. And what do you think?”

“I think it’s a crazy idea to even be discussing, and one that’s bound to get someone in trouble with the law.”

“No, I mean about escaping through the dam.” Clarke drags a finger over the wood of the table, swirling along the grain as her mind whirs. “From what I remember of the facility, the turbine building isn’t far from the edge of Arkadia, and the outflow water heads further inwards to irrigate the agricultural district.” She pauses. “Do you have a map of Arkadia?”

Bellamy sits in silence, then deadpans. “Clarke, why would I have a map of Arkadia?”

“Good point. I’ll go from memory then.” She keeps her finger swirling, now sketching an invisible diagram of the northern corner of Arkadia from what she could recall. “I know a friend of a friend, Finn, he works at the dam, so if I can just remember…”

“Finn Collins?”

Clarke is surprised by Bellamy’s asking, even more so by the face he makes at the name. “Yeah, you know him?”

Bellamy hesitates. “No.”

“Clearly you don’t like him.”

“I don’t like a lot of people.” Clarke’s about to challenge him on that when he continues. “When Octavia was younger, she had a crush on Finn Collins. I think they flirted quite a bit. But then he dropped her once he became interested in someone else, and it was Octavia’s first heartbreak. She did survive, though.” He adds, as if it is necessary.

“Well I wouldn’t get too hung up on Finn Collins if I were you, he flirts with everyone. Trust me, I’d know.”

Bellamy’s brow furrows in surprise. “Finn Collins was with you?”
“Not really, but… sort of.” Clarke says, avoiding details. “He was interested, I wasn’t. It’s no big deal.”

“Octavia didn’t mention that part.”

“Why would she?”

The question hangs over them for a second, then Clarke gets back to work.

“It’s not important. Anyways, from what I remember him describing, the turbine facility is about as close to the wall as you can get without being on official wall-detail guard duty. That’s why it’s under a hell of a lot of surveillance. The turbines are pretty far back to allow for plenty of space for outflow, and there must be a reservoir. But if I’m picturing this correctly,” she says, looking up from the table. “There’s not enough room for the reservoir inside the wall. So that means it’s likely beyond the wall.”

“That sounds feasible,” Bellamy nods. “They could control and monitor things from inside the turbine building on the Arkadia side of the wall, but wouldn’t have to interact much with the actual reservoir.”

“Then, potentially,” Clarke explains, “That means that there is a way out of Arkadia, technically speaking. It’s the same way that the water from the reservoir gets into Arkadia: past the turbines.”

Bellamy leans back in his seat, folding his arms. “Yes, technically speaking, but is it a way that any human could actually get through? Past turbines, Clarke. Those things will rip you to pieces, there’s no way someone could swim a steady course through moving turbines that size. It’s suicide.”

“But what if something did go wrong with the reservoir? There must be a way beyond the wall through the turbine building, even if it’s only for maintenance. Lose those turbines and you lose the strongest source of electric power Arkadia has. There must be some sort of insurance, some highly-monitored maintenance passages in case something did go wrong and they needed to fix it from the outside.”

“And you believe the storm would be enough of a distraction that these hypothetical passages would go unmonitored?”

“Yes.” Clarke feels her breathing pick up in speed, mind racing and sharpened like a blade. “And if anyone, anyone would find an unmonitored yet highly important door to slip through, it would be John Murphy.”

Bellamy nods slowly, turning the information over in his head. “But Tsing mentioned cameras, and you said it yourself, there’s surveillance everywhere. Wouldn’t they have caught Murphy going to a door on a recording, even if no one was watching him live?”

“Maybe you’re right. But if that’s true, then there’s no way that Tsing or the Council would want that information shared with the public. If it implied – or proved, really – that there’s a passage out of Arkadia at the dam, then that’s valuable information.”

They sit in silence for a minute, as if even dancing around this information will send a troupe of guards to the door. Bellamy is the first to speak, scratching at the back of his neck.

“So what do we do with this information, then? It’s not exactly like we really can do anything.”

“We do the same thing we’re doing with Becca’s journal.”
After she works on overnight shift on Wednesday into Thursday, Clarke has the rest of Thursday afternoon off to go home and sleep. Instead, she catches lunch with Wells.

They each pick up their lunch rations from a workers’ dining hall not far from her favorite park. Together they settle in on a comfortable patch of grass and start digging into their standardized cup of soup and bread roll.

“How’s the clinic been?” Wells asks after making light conversation about the storm and their respective parents.

“The usual. I’ve been taking on more hours now that I’m a graduate, but it’s nice that they haven’t had me switch departments or anything. Keeps things familiar.”

He nods. “You think you’ll try to move up and become a surgeon like your mom?”

“Surgeon? God no,” Clarke laughs, shaking her head. “I don’t think I could handle that kind of pressure every day. I think they’d love to move me into more of the emergency response unit, but I like seeing the same patients consistently, getting to know them. I’d have to give that up.”

“How did you hear?”

He shrugs, “You hear lots of things when you work in the Administrative building.”

Something cold and heavy settles into the pit of Clarke’s stomach. A part of her feels it’s only a matter of time before something about her starts circulating around the Administrative building, and it’s another mental reminder to be very, very careful.

“It was tough losing a patient,” Clarke admits. “She was always nice to me.”

“I don’t know Alie Pramheda well but I know she wasn’t exactly close to her sister. It almost seemed like,” he pauses. “Like she did her best to avoid the fact that her sister existed.”

Clarke thinks of the journal, hidden under clothing at the bottom of her drawers. Hard evidence that yes, Becca existed and she could think and feel. And the thoughts and feelings she recorded in that journal ring truer than anything that was ever spoken out loud in Arkadia. They challenge everything.

Clarke plays with the blades of grass slipping between her fingers. Wells is her closest friend, and she trusts him more than anyone. Surely I can trust him a little, right now.

“I know why Becca was in the hospital,” she starts. “But she always seemed so sharp and intelligent whenever I interacted with her. And she had a lot of… interesting ideas.”

“What kinds of things?”

“About things that are happening in Arkadia. Things that aren’t exactly great.”

He leans forward slightly. “What kinds of things?”

Clarke selects her words carefully. “Distinctions between Heads and Hearts.”
“There have always been distinctions between Heads and Hearts, that what makes the system work.”

“But, what she meant was inequalities where there shouldn’t have been. It’s a reoccurring pattern: Hearts, by order of the job assignment system, tend to get jobs that involve more physical labor or less-cerebral tasks, what we tend to look at as “lower” jobs. The system is constructed against them, making it almost impossible for them to elevate themselves and leaving them trapped in their jobs. If they do move up, it tends to be at the expense of working longer days. They work longer days for less, they still can’t afford the provisions they actually need, and they hover at the poverty line.”

“But it’s not like Heads can’t elevate themselves,” Wells argues. “There are several Heads on the Council, for instance.”

“Yes, because they’re voted in by popular vote.”

“No vote is that simple, Clarke.”

Clarke opens her mouth to respond, then freezes. “Wait, are you implying that the vote isn’t actually a free popular vote?”

Wells realizes his mistake. “I didn’t say that. I just said… it can be complicated.”

“What’s complicated about tallying the number of votes and giving the title to the candidate with the most?” This information is like a spark in Clarke’s mind, in her body. She wants to run, to find Bellamy and tell him that there’s another piece to the mystery of Arkadia. She wants to yell it across City Center. “Wells, do you know if they rig the vote?”

“All I’m saying is that… is that I hear things.” It becomes clear that she isn’t going to get anything more out of Wells on that subject. She doesn’t need to. She’s heard plenty.

“Wells, do you realize the kind of position you’re placed in and the power you have? You can hear things that no one else will ever hear, no one beyond the Council. Hell, your position was literally created for you because of your dad.”

“What are you suggesting?” He lowers his voice. “That I’m supposed to become some sort of whistleblower that’ll cost me my job and probably a lot more? And for what, exactly?”

“They wouldn’t touch you since you’re the Chancellor’s son.”

“You think my father wouldn’t choose Arkadia over me, Clarke?” Wells’s eyes are blown wide. “It’s not a tough decision, he’s a Head.”

“He’s your father.”

“Heads rationalize, and that’s what he’d do.”

Wells says it without a beat of hesitation, no second guessing or anything. It gives Clarke pause, makes her think. What would Mom do in that same situation?

He takes a deep breath. “Regardless of what Becca thought or said, I’ve actually seen what the Council is working on, and they’re trying to find a real solution to these problems. They’re working on developing new housing that focuses on impoverished Hearts. It’s certainly a step in the right direction.”

This is all news to Clarke. “What kind of housing?”
“I’m not sure, I don’t know any of the details yet. It’s all in the very early stages but it’s hopeful.”

“And do you think it’ll work?”

“I really hope it does.” Wells’s voice is sincere. Having finished his lunch rations he gathers the soup cup and napkin, then offers to take Clarke’s as well. She lets him, and he starts walking towards the compost bin at the far edge of the field.

That’s when Clarke notices his administrative badge, lying face-up on the grass where he’d been sitting.

Clarke takes the long way home from the clinic that night.

Technically, she didn’t need to go back in at all. But it’s not the first time she’s done that on a free afternoon, and when anyone sees her she explains that she’s here to catch up on a little paperwork. An easy, believable excuse.

And she does do a little paperwork. But inevitably her work tablet keeps malfunctioning and she’s certain it’s a problem with the battery chip so she travels to the basement of the clinic, to a particular storage closet to find a replacement chip.

Anyone watching on surveillance could see Clarke enter the closet with the tablet to fix the battery. There’s no cameras inside the closet.

There is, however, the standardized badge printer they use to print all of the medical staff’s identification cards.

Clarke starts up the machine, sending out a silent prayer that the loud air-conditioning units in the basement will be enough to drown out any sound of the printer. And then she’s staring at a blinking screen asking for the access code.

Tugging up the corner of her sleeve, Clarke reads the string of letters and numbers she’s written on her arm. It’s a master access code, one her councilwoman mother had written down and hidden at home. Luckily, Clarke knows her mother better than anyone would think, so she knew exactly where the slip would be hidden.

Abby, secretly, is very sentimental. So she’d hidden the code behind one of Clarke’s framed crayon drawings from as a child. The one with Clarke, Abby, and Jake.

Clarke feels the slightest tinge of guilt as she enters the code. But then she thinks about Becca’s journal, John Murphy’s disappearance, what Wells let slip about the integrity of the popular elections… it is all too much, all adding up to be a puzzle that is too big for Clarke to just let slip by.

The machine dings and Clarke’s in. Remembering when she received her printed medical identification badge, she enters in the standard dimensions and specifications. The stinging guilt grows stronger as she pulls Wells’s administrative badge from the sole of her shoe where she’s been hiding it. She places the card facedown on the small scanner pad and presses a button. She must work fast.

A few more buttons and dialogue boxes later and the printer whirs into action. Clarke waits without breathing as it hums and clatters, until finally it spits out a small card.

A perfect copy of Wells’s badge.
So when Clarke walks back from the clinic that night, she doesn’t take the shortest route home. Instead, she meanders through her favorite park. At one point she stops to tie her shoe, but no one would notice her slipping Wells’s original badge onto the pile of leaves by her foot. Someone will, however, eventually find it, and they’ll think he just dropped it. Or perhaps Wells will retrace his steps back to the park and assume the same thing.

Clarke’s fingers itch as she walks away, itch to reach into her waistband and fiddle with her fake badge. But she needs to keep it hidden until she can use it.

And she’s using it to finally get some damn answers.

Chapter End Notes

Hi readers!

A P O L O G I E S for the wait – to put it lightly, writing has been something I’ve been really struggling to do these past few months. I sat down to write this chapter about a dozen times and couldn’t past the first page.
Then I received a notification saying that “Heads and Hearts”, along with my completed fic “Kingdom Come” had been nominated in the Bellarke Fanwork Awards on Tumblr. I wasn’t aware of this competition before, so it was a very pleasant surprise! I was so touched to know what complete strangers liked my writing enough to nominate it for Best Underrated WIP (and “Kingdom Come” for Best Royalty AU), and ultimately that was the final boost that got me back to writing. I then proceeded to write this chapter in two days, because I really did miss this fic.

Anyways, I appreciate your support from the bottom of my heart and I’m excited to keep bringing you more updates to “Heads and Hearts”! As I’ve said before, I have the whole storyline mapped out so I’m eager to show you where it’s going to go, and hear what you think about it!

You guys are seriously the best!

-K.T.
“Clarke,” Bellamy breathes, his eyes cloud with confusion as he refuses to move them from his kitchen table. “What is that?”

It’s Friday night in the Blake residence, and perhaps the only thing more concerning than the small plastic rectangle on the table is Clarke’s cool, nonchalant demeanor as she leans, arms folded, against the nearby wall.

“I think it’s pretty obvious what that is.”

“Why is it here? With you? In my kitchen?”

“I decided to make a copy of Wells’s badge.” Clarke shrugs like it’s no big deal. “Because we need it.”

“Is this something I’m going to regret?”

“Not if we don’t get caught.”

Bellamy sighs, long and frustrated, running both hands through his messy hair. He clasps them at the back of his head, almost afraid to ask any more questions. Almost. “Where are we breaking into?”

“I was talking with Wells—” Clarke clearly see the alarm flicker across Bellamy’s face, because she quickly adds, “Don’t worry, I didn’t tell him anything about what we’re doing. I just mentioned Becca and some of her radical ideas. I was trying to get him to talk. And he mentioned that there were little things going on behind the scenes, things people don’t know about. He implied that the elections weren’t exactly fair.”

His voice is quieter now as he repeats, “Where are we breaking into?”

“The Administrative building.”

Perhaps he should protest, or remind her what a stupid idea this is. But instead, he just laughs. Maybe it’s because he’s finally feeling the gravity of what they’re doing, maybe he knows just how far gone he is.

“Of course. I don’t know why I expected it to be somewhere easier, or perhaps a little less
monitored. I mean, the border wall was boring, frankly. A snooze-fest.”

Clarke’s eyes narrow at his sarcasm. “I’m serious, Bellamy. We keep finding these puzzle pieces, and I’m sorry but I can’t help but want to figure this out. I have to.”

That’s a Head tendency right there. Bellamy almost says it out loud, but he catches himself. It’s not going to help anything, reminding Clarke of that obvious distinction between them. That frustrating little line he keeps forgetting about and coming awfully close to crossing.

“So what are we looking for?”

“Honestly, I think anything strange at this point.” It is Clarke’s turn to laugh a little. “But this whole thing is strange, and we need a place to start. I know they keep records on all of Arkadia’s citizens, so I was thinking we’d start with Becca Pramheda. See what they’ve got on her. Clearly, between her sister’s position on the Council and her own interest in the Kane movement, I think a lot of our questions lead back to Becca and whatever is in that coded journal. Maybe there’s something in her file, some other clue, that will help us decode it.”

Bellamy’s memory leaps back to that first night when Clarke came barging into his house after reading the available passages of the journal. Her wild eyes, her frantic words. Her father’s name was in that journal. Hell, so was Bellamy’s. If Becca’s journal was what they thought it was – some coded exposé on the darkest secrets of Arkadia – then they were holding the most powerful document in Arkadia in their possession. If only they could unlock it.

Clarke seems to be thinking the same thing, because she comes close to Bellamy. “Wells implied that they rig the elections. Becca seemed to think that people would be killed in these accidents that weren’t really accidents at all.” She’s mere inches away from him and he hangs on to her hushed words. She glances down, and when her voice cracks with a tinge of raw emotion, he fights the urge not to reach for her.

“Bellamy, I know I gave Becca the right dosage of her meds. I was methodical, I was very good at my job. But somehow she has a bad reaction in the middle of the night? Out of the blue? What if… what if they killed her for knowing too much?”

He’d be lying if he said the thought hadn’t crossed his mind, if only for a dangerous second. “They as in the Council?”

“It has to be. The Council, probably the Chancellor too. I can’t imagine something like this could happen – with zero investigation, mind you – without the Council’s complicit knowledge.”

“You’re right. They’re the only ones with the power to pull it off.” He steps back, able to think more clearly with a little distance between them. “We need to do this soon, before Wells could ever suspect that you stole his card.”

“Exactly.” Clarke gives a halfway grin. “Tomorrow is Foundation Day, and with the festivities happening in City Center, it’s the perfect distraction.”

He nods, feeling better about this. “Of course. Everyone’s eyes will be on what’s happening outside, and with added security for the event I’m guessing there will be less inside the Administrative building itself.”

“It’s definitely working in our favor.”

“So we go after Becca’s private file. Do we know where in the Administrative building it would be in?”
“Becca wasn’t a refugee, so I doubt her file would be in any of those banks. But she was institutionalized, so my best guess is we can access it through the health department branch of the building. And, luckily, I know the master access code for the councilwoman most directly connected to the health department.”

Something twists low in Bellamy’s stomach, rousing a cold, ominous feeling. “Clarke, we’re using Wells’s badge and your mother’s code. If anything goes wrong… if they have any reason to check the security records and see who’s accessing the information, they’ll deduce it’s you.”

Clarke swallows. “I know. I’ve thought about that. And… and I’m okay with it.”

“What if I’m not?” The words blurt out before he can stop himself.

“It’s like you’ve said, Bellamy. I’m a Head whose mother sits on the Council. If I get caught, there’s a good chance I’ll be allowed certain privileges that someone else wouldn’t have. I know my mom would fight for me, so she’d probably get them to lessen any sentence.” She pauses, steeling herself for something. “Which is why you’re not breaking into anything.”

Bellamy blinks, waiting. “Excuse me?”

“If I get caught, I might be able to use my privilege to get out of any real trouble. You can’t say the same.”

“You might. There’s a chance it won’t work.”

“But I’ve got a better chance than you. Which is why you’ll be outside the Administrative building, standing guard.”

“Against?” His voice was rising.

“Against any Arkadia guards or officials who look like they’re on to me.”

“Have you actually thought this through? What am I supposed to do if they come for you? How am I supposed to contact you?”

“I… haven’t gotten that far yet.” She falters.

“Nope. Not happening.” His feet carried me right in front of her, challenging her stubborn expression with one of his own. “Remember what I told you, that first night when you read the journal? I said if you’re going down this road, then we’re doing this together. I know too much to just sit by at this point. I won’t do it. I won’t let you do this alone.”

“But if they catch you—–”

“They won’t catch us.” He insists. “We’re going to be careful.”

Raven had slept in Saturday morning. It is Foundation Day, after all, which meant that most of the working citizens in Arkadia either were redirected to help with the festivities, or they had the day off. Luckily for her, building maintenance isn’t assigned to the holiday proceedings, meaning Raven has time to sleep in.

Her Saturday morning is slow, leisurely. Finn got off easy as well, so they spend much of the morning lounging together, until their growling stomachs finally rouse them up out of bed. They cook their morning rations, clean up around the modest house, Raven tinkers with old digital alarm
bell while Finn offers moral support—it’s a junky pre-war piece that Clarke found in an old
hospital storeroom and smuggled to Raven for a challenge.

She’s got a tiny screwdriver in her hand, examining the inside of the clock’s ancient radio wiring
with it held up right to her nose, when Finn gently taps her shoulder.

“Babe, it’s almost two. Maybe we should head over to City Center?”

She sighs, sitting upright and feeling her back crack at the movement. She’s lost track of how long
she was sitting like that. “If you insist. Pageant’s first, right?”

He nods. Every year, there’s a Foundation Day pageant at City Center, an elaborate retelling of
Arkadia’s famous founding, all acted by children as the “next generation of Arkadians”. It’s equal
parts sentimental spectacle and compulsory patriotism, with the subliminal reminder of the eternal
importance of obeying Arkadia’s laws.

Obedience in return for security. Compliance for peace.

Raven reaches for her red bomber jacket, hanging on the corner of her bedpost. Honestly, she’d love
to just stay home from the Foundation Day festivities this year. While Foundation Day was usually a
good time for those involved, she couldn’t help but feel something strange deep in her gut. Perhaps it
is the undercurrent of complete political submission that Foundation Day seems to celebrate. The
pageants and the demonstrations, they are all just a looming reminder of the Council’s control over
every aspect of their life.

It’s almost like Finn can read these thoughts on Raven’s face. She must not be as guarded as she
thinks. He wraps his arms around her waist. “I know you don’t want to go.”

“Am I that obvious?”

“Pretty much. But, need I remind you, they’ve got special occasion rations tonight. Plus,” his face
breaks into a sly grin. “A friend of mine is working the beverage stations, and he smuggled me a few
extra booze tokens.”

He reaches into his pocket, withdrawing a large handful of little plastic chips.

“That’s a lot more than a few.” Raven laughs.

“Happy Foundation Day.”

“The war brought darkness and fear across the continent. The cities were left in ruins. There was no
more security, only chaos and devastation.”

A shiver runs down Clarke’s spine, slow and creeping. The description is all the more unsettling
coming from the mouth of a child. The little boy stands at the edge of the makeshift stage, a raised
platform set up in the City Center. Hanging above the stage are several large banners, perfectly still
against the clear, windless sky. Their printed descriptions loom over the crowd gathered below:
Honor, Community, Diligence, Order, and Identity. That last one, in Arkadia, is synonymous with
“category”.

As the boy narrators, a pair of little girls extend a sweeping black cloth, gauzy and fine, across the
stage. The other young ensemble members cower and wither underneath the symbolic darkness, and
the drone of somber humming rings out.
The audience, the citizen population of Arkadia, watches in complete silence.

“But from the ashes, humanity would rise again.” A different narrator, a girl with a wire frame of glasses, continues. “And from our darkest hour, an idea came forth. A small shining beacon of hope.”

From underneath the black fabric, a faint light began to glow. It grew stronger. As the fabric rustles and waves and is pulled back, the light appears in the hands of a tiny boy. Clarke knows it had to be a small handheld LED, specially constructed for this pageant. But still, its effect in context is appropriately poetic. The child raises his cupped hands upwards, and the cowering ensemble draws tightly around him, relaxing in the glow of the light.

“This beacon of hope would become our Arkadia.”

That is her cue. Clarke stands at the edge of the viewing mob, on the far side away from where the honored Council sits at their own platform. Away from her own mother.

Clarke moves slowly, like she’s gliding through water. Her steps make no sound and she fades away to the edges of the square. A peripheral glance confirms that Bellamy is in motion too.

She ducks behind a stack of crates and slips among to the quiet preparations for the dining and merriment to follow the pageant. Those assigned to staffing the food and beverages stations move around quietly, pushing carts and carrying boxes of prepared rations for later. Keeping her head down, Clarke moves quickly, not attracting any extra attention to herself. She snakes along between crates and canopies and booths until she sees the familiar marble exterior of the Administrative building come closer. She aims for a door at its back.

Clarke feels a presence slip along beside her, and she can sense it is Bellamy’s. He wears the same blank expression on his face, but his eyes are alive and dart to hers. They don’t speak, but she takes comfort in his quick gaze.

Ducking behind a large box, they each draw their hoods over their heads. Their clothes are plain and nondescript, with their sleeves tugged low over their left wrists to cover their symbol tattoos.

Bellamy checks the path to their intended door and nods to Clarke. Steps swift and in tandem, they stride to the doorway with the coast clear. Their heads are down, their gazes are up and alert. From a pocket in her waistband, Clarke slides out the copied badge and taps it against the door scanner. Her heart stops beating for a moment that seems to stretch on for ages.

Finally, the indicator on the scanner turns green and they hear the door’s latch unlock. Bellamy lets out an audible exhale and reaches for the door handle. Clarke’s blood pounding in her ears like a drum, they slip inside.

The door closes securely behind them. They enter a stairwell, and Clarke leads them up three flights until they reach another door, labeled “Health and Wellness Department: RESTRICTED ACCESS”. She thanks the stars above that Wells, as an upper-level apprentice and intern to the Council, has access to any part of the building that his job might require. Apparently, that includes delivering memos to the Health and Wellness Department. The indicator on this door goes green, and they’re in.

“Head down still.” Bellamy says. They’re expecting to go through at least two more locked doors until they reach a room without a security camera. Luckily, the halls are empty.

They pass through another badge-activated door marked “Intelligence and Records”, and stop at a
final door with a keypad, not a badge scanner. Bellamy turns to Clarke, whispering, “You got it?”

Clarke nods. She’s memorized her mother’s all-access keycode, reading and rereading it at least a hundred times a day since stealing Wells’s badge. She slides the edge of her sleeves down over her thumbs and, without missing a beat, types in the letters and numbers with her covered fingers.

Again, that pause of no breath, no heartbeat while she watches the screen on the door blink… think… then the message “ACCESS GRANTED” and the door slides open.

They step inside the room and the door shuts behind them. It’s strangely quiet, and the absence of the hallway’s ventilation system is stark and distracting. They keep the lights dimmed. Three of the walls are covered by towering black metallic boxes, the components of some supercomputer salvaged from before the wars. Little diodes flicker red and green and yellow across the fronts.

Against the final wall is a long flat desk with a more familiar computer setup. There’s a sleek keypad and control mouse, and the wall is dominated by a wide expanse of white plastic, which must be the screen.

Clarke slides into a rolling chair in front of the desk, Bellamy hovering at her shoulder with his arms folded. She nudges the mouse and the screen flickered to life, images projected from some unseen unit. A crisp blue page with one inquiry: IDENTITY VERIFICATION

“Moment of truth,” Bellamy says under his breath.

Clarke’s eyes slip closed for a moment, envisioning the access code. Her fingers drift over the keypad and seem to move of their own accord, like she’s in a trance. She’s not nervous or jittery. It’s the perfect calm and focus that both surprises and scares her.

She presses the enter key before she has a moment to second-guess herself. The screen changes to an empty blue page. She’s almost certain they’ve failed when it changes again, to a long list of subfolders and categories.

“We’re in,” Clarke says, so relieved she’s practically giddy. “I can’t believe that actually worked.”

“Me neither. But let’s move quickly, just in case.”

Clarke nods and begins paging through. She clicks through a winding path of folders and subfolders, digging into individual health records and then trying to broaden the search to individual records on the whole. Luckily, her mother’s council access code seems to allow them a wider range of information access. Bellamy’s gaze alternates between the screen and the shut door.

Clarke’s eyes, meanwhile, begin to glaze. The dizzying collection of electronic folders makes her feel like she’s falling down a dark hole without hitting the bottom. She’s scanning and skimming the pages for special words, narrowing her search further and further, until…

“Becca Pramheda.”

Bellamy leans in closer. She’s never been more satisfied to click a button, and when she taps the link for “ConfidRecs_Pramheda_Becca” --- the screen shows a blank page with a small line of text.

_The file you’ve requested no longer exists._

“What?” Clarke exits and reenters the file, receiving the same message. A weight drops heavy at the pit of her stomach. “No, no. This can’t be right.”
“What if it’s just under a different file name? Go back to Becca’s folder and try the other documents.”

Clarke does this, and every search draws the same message. The file you’ve requested no longer exists. Her clicking increases in pace, becoming more frantic.

“I – I don’t know.” She grabs her hair at her forehead. “It should be here, it should be here. This is where personal records are kept. By the looks of things, they don’t delete files when a person dies.”

“So why is Becca missing all of her information? If anything supports your theory that Becca’s death was an organized job – to silence her – then this certainly does.”

“But this does nothing to help us decode her journal, and that’s where the real secrets are! Even if we could allege that someone had Becca killed, then our only real evidence is a missing file that we never should’ve had access to anyways. It’s not enough!”

Clarke feels panic rising in her throat, her airways feeling shorter and shorter. Another dead end. First the wall, and now this. She clicks back out of the folder and tries again, seeing nothing different. Desperate, she pages back to an inquiry bar and tries typing in Becca’s name over and over, first then last then first and last, into the search. It keeps leading to the same absent files. It’s like Becca never existed.

She thrusts her head into her hands. Here they are, sitting at one of the most powerful computers in Arkadia, capable of accessing information on anyone, and they still can’t unlock the one person they’re trying to learn more about. She feels Bellamy shift, reaching over her hunched form to rest his fingers on the keypad.

“Humor me,” he says in a low voice.

For a second, Clarke is afraid of what he’ll search. It’s going to be Aurora Blake, and he’ll find some awful truth about her death that we both already suspect. Or perhaps he’ll search up her dad.

Instead, he types four letters: KANE

Raven grasps her scuffed metal cup, swirling the amber liquid around and around in circles. Warm. She feels warm. And… fuzzy. Not like fuzzy in a hairy way, but like all of her edges have been smudged and blurred. Like she’s made of wet paint and someone has smeared her shapes.

Her head doesn’t quite feel attached to the rest of her body, and her mouth is running away from her head. She starts talking without realizing she’s talking.

“Building maintenance sucks.”

At first, only Finn seems to hear her. He sits across the wooden table from her, his own cup between his hands.

Raven shakes her head with a laugh. “I finally said it, goddammit. My job sucks. I spent the last week in the basement of a bunch of empty warehouses, following my superiors around and carrying their tools. I’m about as useful as a toolbelt.”

She takes another deep swig, relishing the sweet ale. She can never afford this good stuff on a normal day. But it’s a holiday. “And then -- and then because I wanted to try something different, something exciting, I volunteered when they needed someone for a little expedition into the foundation. I volunteered when they need some dumbass to climb into the crawlspace. To do what?
To count the interior crossbeams under the floors.”

Her voice must’ve risen a little bit, because other people are watching her, listening to her story. There is Finn, and her friend Gina. Wells is a respectable distance away, at the farther end of the table with a few other Heads, but he listens too. Raven’s lost all ways to really gauge how loud she is at this point.

Everything feels so warm and bubbly. There’s music playing somewhere, and she sways along in time.

“So I’m under the floor, right? Crawling on my hands and knees counting goddamn crossbeams overhead, and it’s filthy down there. Dust, dirt, rat shit everywhere. I’m covered in it. And I swear to god that my superiors are just marching around over me, because there’s this pounding on the floor over me and more dust keeps falling from above.” She leans in, capturing them in her story. “So, as I’m under the floor, my knees and hands covered in more rat shit than I’ve ever seen in my life, I realize: there are scanners that can do this job. They count the crossbeams through the floor by the screws in place. And I’m pretty damn sure they’ve got one of those working scanners in their pile of fancy-ass tools that a lowly newbie like me isn’t allowed to touch.”

Another swig, a long one, and Raven’s emptied her cup again. At this point, she’s lost track of the number of drinks she’s had so far. At least five, maybe six? Who cares? She slams it onto the table.

“I get out of the crawlspace, and I smell absolutely awful, and I feel absolutely awful. And these bastards are standing around laughing at me. Not a little friendly jeering. No, they sent me in there to do shit labor when they had a machine perfectly capable of doing it for me. They did it to humiliate me.”

She draws out those last two words slowly. There’s fire in her now, sparking in the warm half-dozen beers in her stomach and spreading throughout her body. Perhaps Finn can see it in her eyes, and maybe that’s why he’s giving her a strange, wary look.

“But what can I do?” She asks, laughing a little. Raven asks Finn first, then turns out to the table. “What can I do? My superiors are a bunch of dumbasses, but they’re Heads. And me? I’m a Heart. Doesn’t matter that I’m smarter than they are. Doesn’t matter that I correct their mistakes, and half the time they don’t listen to me and I know if there’s an issue somehow us stupid Hearts are going to get blamed for it.”

Some of the other Hearts at the table start nodding in agreement. Finn stays still.

“I can’t do anything, because I’m a Heart.” Raven leans forward, rising off the bench and standing in a crouch. “I’m a Heart not because I think I’m actually a good fit – believe me, I’m not. I’m a Heart because some test told me I am. Trust the test, they say. Trust the system. We’re all supposed to just trust the fucking system.”

“Raven,” Finn says in a low voice. “Maybe you should be a little quieter.”

“Why? We’re all supposed to talk about how great the system is. How much we love the sorting system. It’s all about understanding who we are, right? And what a load of bullshit that is.”

Finn reaches for her empty cup. “I think you’ve had enough to drink for right now.”

“Go ahead and take it. I don’t need it. I feel awesome.”

She feels invincible.
“You all know it,” she says, voice a notch louder. She addresses the table. “You know I’m right. The test is a steaming pile of horse shit! We’re expected, we’re forced, to trust this test without ever really understanding how it works. What if it’s rigged? What if it’s just plain wrong?”

A small crowd has formed around her table now. From the back, some guy calls out, “The only ones who understand how the test works are the Heads who administer it!”

“Exactly!” Before Raven’s brain can catch up with her body, she climbs her way on top of the table and rises to standing. She’s riding on the pure adrenaline in her veins and the escalating energy of her listeners. She feels Finn reach for her calf and she shakes him away. There’s an audience to speak to.

“I am smart. I can make things, and fix things. But some bullshit tests tells me I’m too emotional to be a Head. That my intelligence, the very thing I’m proudest of, isn’t good enough for the rest of the world. So I’ll be stuck to the same shit jobs for the rest of my life, trapped under superiors who aren’t half as smart as me. Stuck in some shitty house because I can’t earn enough credits to live a decent life, stuck under a system that will always assume that I’m to blame even if I’m innocent. Because apparently being a Heart is wrong.”

She catches Finn’s worried stare out of the corner of her eye. Why is he worried? She’s speaking her mind, and her heart. And it feels amazing. She looks out at the faces of the people watching her.

Sure, some look uneasy. But the truth can do that to people. Some are smiling, and that’s when Raven knows she’s right.

She kicks over her metal cup, sending it skittering down the table.

“You know what? Fuck that! Fuck the system that tells me I’m not good enough, not smart enough because I’m not a Head! Fuck the system that’s just trying to keep me down in the dirt! Because you know what? I think they’re scared. They’re scared of people like me because we have power inside of us. They’re scared because we don’t fit into their neat little boxes so they can dictate how are lives are going to go. And I’m fucking sick of it!”

There are cheers and claps in agreement. It warms her, fuels that fire inside of her. Then Raven feels hands on her legs again, and she wheels around ready to lash out at Finn. But it’s not Finn who grabs her: it’s a pair of Arkadia guards. She recognizes their all-black padded armor. Raven kicks but they’re too quick for her lazy reflexes. They pull and she loses her balance, falling hard chest-down against the table. Her sloshing stomach rises to her throat and she sees stars. She notices hands – they are Gina’s – reaching for her, but the guards work fast and she’s yanked backwards onto her feet. Swaying, her hands are wrenched behind her back and she feels the sharp cold metal of cuffs.

It’s like all the alcohol hits her at once, turning that warm feeling into something suffocating and overwhelming. Her head weighs a hundred pounds. She’s aware of Finn shouting and trying to reach her, but a third guard pushes him back. The crowd around her watches with wide eyes, and some cry out against this. Most just keep watching.

“That’s enough, you,” the one guard tells her, his voice hot against her ear. A bolt of anger rips through Raven’s body and she starts to thrash again.

“Get your fucking hands off me!” She screams, she swears. She rolls her shoulders, trying to do anything to break free. But the cuffs are too tight and her bum leg is roaring with pain. It buckles under her, and the guards seize their chance to tighten their grip on her. She feels herself being pulled backwards. She doesn’t know where they are taking her.

“Get your hands off of me!”
The screen explodes into a dazzling web of images and text. The dark room is flooded with light from the busy screen, and Bellamy hears Clarke’s audible gasp from beside him. He feels it too.

They’ve hit the motherload.

The first thing he recognizes are the images. At the center of the web is an old identification photo, dated and labeled with KANE, MARCUS. It shows a young man with floppy brown hair, a long nose, and a piercing stare. There’s an energy flickering behind those eyes. In smaller images around Kane’s old photo are several other faces of Arkadians that Bellamy doesn’t recognize. An eerie feeling comes over him as he wonders what happened to these people. Did they escape Arkadia, like Kane was said to have done? Or were they simply silenced like Becca?

He guides the mouse over their photos and a textbox expands, listing their names and identification numbers. Over half are labeled with “missing” in red text. The rest, unsurprisingly, say exactly what Bellamy had been fearing: “terminated”.

“Oh my god,” Clarke says in an exhale.

Hands shaking, Bellamy scrolls to the other photos in the composite. There are aerial shots of thick green forests dotted with post-apocalyptic ruins, presumably the woods beyond Arkadia. Bellamy didn’t recognize specifics, but he remembers what the woods were like. The photos are full of busy foliage and drawn-in red lines, indicating something unseen in quick scrawl. Other images are blurrier and more zoomed in, and as Bellamy squints he could see what the red circles were capturing: there are people in the trees. Sentries high up in the branches, pixelated shapes with objects that look startlingly like guns. There are blurry images of people on the ground too, dressed in dark outfits to blend in with the forest. But these fuzzy photos of actual people are few and far between.

“The Kane rebellion… is real?” Clarke finally breaks the stunned silence. “The Council’s always denied it, but here they have proof. These are people, armed people, living in the woods outside of Arkadia. And they must think Kane is among them.”

Bellamy doesn’t want to get his hopes up. “There are a lot of armed people living in these woods, trust me.”

“Yeah, but this is bigger. This feels bigger. Look at how much stuff they’ve got here.” Clarke waves her hand at the screen. Text files indicate compilations of any clues and information they have about Kane’s movement. Some are titled as “testimonies”, and Bellamy can’t help but wonder how much of this information was tortured out of a reluctant informant. There are lists of people theorized to have contact with Kane or his subordinates, though the names won’t show in the documents’ previews.

“This is unbelievable.” Bellamy blinks his eyes several times, as if the screen is just some imagined, desperately-conjured vision. “Not only is the Kane rebellion real, but they are clearly lots of these insurgents and they’re armed.”

Clarke reaches for the mouse and hovers it near another photo. This one is a strange computer simulation, adjusting Kane’s identification headshot and aging it up to how he could look today. The label includes “Current status: unknown/presumed alive”.

“They think he’s still alive,” she says. “That’s why they’ve got all of this information on him. His infamy only grows considering they haven’t managed to kill him yet.”
“The public doesn’t know that.”

“And they’ve done a good job of hiding that. But clearly he’s still a major concern, especially if they’re spending the resources to send camera drones or actual airships out to search the forest for his group.”

Clarke scrolls over to the bottom corner, where another image is layered under a stack of text files. It expands and reveals a wide map of the forest outside of Arkadia. Bellamy’s jaw drops. He didn’t think such a thing existed after the wars. But this map clearly marks Arkadia in the middle of the diagram, surrounded by a thick wall. In the distance is a wide arc of mountains, and Bellamy had no idea they were so expansive. He’d heard about the far-away mountains years ago, but never substantial details. They didn’t bother teaching geography in Arkadia.

Most importantly, there was an area indicated by a bright yellow highlight: “Potential KANE Insurgent Territory”.

“They don’t know where Kane is,” he says. “But they know where he could be.”

“It’s a wide zone.” Clarke suddenly reaches out and snatches a pen from the corner of the desk. She yanks up her long sleeve and turns her right arm over, revealing her pale underarm skin. Uncapping the pen with her teeth, Clarke works quickly to copy the map down. Her shapes are rough and the labels are abbreviated, but she tries to get in as many of the aerial landmarks as she can.

“Smart idea,” Bellamy says, nodding. Her little halfway smile sends a flicker of warmth through him. His hands are anxious and still trembling. It’s too much information for two people to bottle up inside of them. His tongue feels too big for his mouth, like he’ll step outside and just blurt this secret without meaning to and be unable to stop it. He realizes this is how Clarke must’ve felt when she started reading the journal. That’s why she had to tell him everything.

Or maybe she just wanted him to know too?

“It’ll have to do,” Clarke sighs, and another glance shows her arm is now covered in ink. She rolls her sleeve down slowly, careful not to smudge it. “I’ll copy it down somewhere safe when I get home.”

“Is there anything else we can copy?” He guides the mouse over to one of the name lists with no preview. He clicks on it without hesitation, but suddenly the screen changes. Everything disappears, except for one dialogue box and a label: Please enter additional identification credentials.

Bellamy’s brow furrows. “That’s strange.” Clarke enters in her mother’s code again, but the same message reappears, this time in red text. Please enter additional identification credentials.

“No!” Clarke cries out louder than she should, and tries retyping the code. On her third try, the screen goes completely black, leaving them in darkness.

“No, no!” Clarke’s voice is choked with panic. “They locked us out! We had it, we had it!”

Bellamy’s stomach plummets to the floor. Suddenly, the humming of the wall computers becomes too much, like the buzzing of angry bees or the distant thudding of footsteps. “Clarke, we should leave, now. We don’t know if that lockout triggers a guard response.”

Thankfully, for once, Clarke doesn’t fight him. Instead, she leaps out of the seat and – in the sudden darkness – bumps into him hard. He feels her small form against him and notices she’s trembling just as much as he is. Together, they work their way over to the door and he fumbles around for the
handle, finally finding the trigger button to slide the door open from inside.

The hall is empty but they move quickly. Luckily, the doors leading towards the exits don’t require scanners, so they navigate along faster than when they came in. Clarke’s pulled her hood over her bright blond hair, but Bellamy can see her eyes underneath glisten with frustrated tears. The hairs at the back of his head stand straight on end, his ears listening for the sounds of any oncoming guards. They pass through doorway after doorway without pause.

The last door slides open and they reach the stairwell, but Bellamy isn’t relaxing yet. He hears the door shut behind them. Clarke leads the way down the first flight of stairs, then starts down the second. Bellamy watches her freeze and stiffen before he hears the sound he’s been dreading: footsteps. They come from below and move swiftly up the metal staircase.

Clarke whirls around, her eyes enormous. Bellamy is sure he mirrors her. His heart pulses in his throat and pounds in his ears. They can’t reach the door below, but they won’t have enough time to scan their card at the door above. Besides, venturing back into the depths of the Administrative building would be suicide. They’d get cornered and caught.

“Clarke…”

He shoots a look over the edge of the stairs and sees a black-armored guard climbing with heavy steps. Bellamy’s blood runs cold.

“Take your hood off.”

He spins on Clarke. “Are you crazy?” But she’s already yanked off her hood and is unzipping her jacket. He’s about to call her crazy when he sees how calm and steady her face is. She has an idea. A plan. His hands feeling slow, he pushes back his hood.

That’s when Clarke crashes into him. She moves quicker than he could’ve expected. One hand reaches around his waist to grip his back and the other digs into the curls at the back of his head. The momentum of her sudden charge allows her to flip him around and pull him along with her, until Clarke’s back is against the concrete wall. Then she kisses him.

For a second, Bellamy’s mind goes absolutely blank. There’s just Clarke, and the feeling of her soft lips against his, and she’s kissing him. She curves up against him, pulling him closer and closer. His own body tenses for a moment, before reacting instinctively and relaxing into her, feeling the warmth of her chest and her hands and her lips. The kiss is swift and passionate and intense.

From what feels like a million miles away, Bellamy hears the steps of the guard reach their platform. Clarke pulls away, leaving him breathless.

“Oh, I’m so sorry sir,” she says to the guard, an appropriate flush across her reddened cheeks. And it all comes crashing onto Bellamy at once. Clarke’s plan.

“You two aren’t supposed to be in here.” Luckily, the guard is an older man who can look down on them as a pair of hormone-crazy young people. Clarke’s plan is smart, brilliant even. He just wishes… he…

Bellamy isn’t sure what he wishes.

“Sorry,” Clarke says innocently. “We saw the door was open and we – well – we were just looking for a quiet place and a little – um, privacy.”

Bellamy’s sure his cheeks are just as humiliatingly red as Clarke’s, just not for the same reason. His
stomach feels like it’s at his feet again.

The guard clears his throat awkwardly, clearly as uncomfortable as Clarke intended him to be. “This is restricted access. You’ll have to find… somewhere else.”

“Of course, very sorry.”

For a flickering second, something changes in the guard. Bellamy watches his eyes rake over the two of them, still in a stiff embrace. Clarke’s left hand rests intimately on his chest and his own hands, frozen, wrap around her waist. The guard’s gaze narrows at the sight of their hands, and Bellamy realizes he’s noticed their mismatching tattoos: a Head and a Heart.

“I’ll let you off with a warning,” the guard says with a stern stare, and Clarke slides out of his arms. She demurely repeats thank-you’s to him, and she sweetly – but firmly – grips Bellamy’s forearm and leads him down the stairs. The guard shadows them until they’re out the door, and only after it closes does Clarke relax.

Bellamy doesn’t.

She stares at her boots. “I’m sorry, I should’ve warned you but--- but there wasn’t exactly enough time to explain it. I had to think quickly.”

“It’s fine.” His voice sounds tighter than he’d intended, and he immediately regrets what he’s said. He knows Clarke was only trying to give them a decent excuse for being in that stairwell, to get the guard off their backs and keep him from becoming suspicious.

But, still, some annoying little part of him keeps reminding him of how good it felt when he thought it was real. When, for a moment, he thought Clarke wasn’t pretending. He wasn’t pretending.

“Bellamy,” Clarke starts, hearing the uncomfortableness in his voice. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s… it’s nothing. Whatever.”

“If I’d known you would be so uncomfortable with it, I wouldn’t have done it.”

“But then we would’ve gotten caught and without a decent excuse.” He forces something like a smile. “It was a good idea. Let’s just… move on. Find something else to talk about.”

He saw Clarke tug at her right sleeve, where the inky map was hidden.

They had plenty to talk about.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I'm trying to get back into establishing a steady rhythm for writing, and I had a lot of fun writing this chapter in particular. I like to think the first few chapters really set up the world, and now I can dig deeper into the action and the drama. Things are happening...
I'd love to know what you think about this chapter! Hit me up in the comments with any thoughts or predictions - it's always really cool to read your reviews and hear what you think.

Thanks!
-K.T.
I'm Not Ready

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There's a cold heart, buried beneath,
and warm blood, running deep
Secrets - are mine to keep
protected by silent sleep
I'm not ready, I'm not ready
for the weight of us

-Sanders Bohlke, “The Weight of Us”

The high-pitched beeping of her alarm clock yanks Clarke from sleep. She groans, rolling onto her stomach and burrowing her face deep into her pillow. Mornings are not her best time of day.

It’s been three days since Foundation Day, and Clarke’s schedule at the clinic has kept her plenty busy. Not busy enough, however, to keep those recent discoveries out of her mind. It seems that, as soon as she closes her eyes to think or have a moment of peace, she sees that dazzling web of Kane-related files projected on the inside of her eyelids. Deep at the bottom of her desk, sandwiched between old school reports, there’s her crude map copied from her arm onto a page of notebook paper. It’s like the secrets from the Kane file are rattling around in her head like coins in the bottom of a too-empty jar, clattering and clanging and desperately begging for attention.

Every muscle in her body screaming in reluctance, Clarke drags her body out of bed. Since it’s Tuesday, her shift starts marginally later and allows her time to eat an actual breakfast. She rolls her head around on her shoulders, feeling her neck creak. Eyes bleary, Clarke fumbles her away to the bathroom and presses the shower panel, hearing the soft rushing sound as the pipes fill and water spills from the spout.

Under the warm spray, Clarke can feel her stress and her worries roll off her shoulders like the streams of water running from her hair. It’s as though she can see and think more clearly. Becca’s journal speculated that the Council is doing horrible things under the guise of “the system”, but plenty of the journal remains in code. Becca showed an affiliation – if not a close relationship – to the Kane resistance cause. The breach in the administrative building proves that the Kane resistance is a real thing, and that there are people hiding out in the woods around Arkadia that pledge allegiance to Kane. The key to unlocking Becca’s code, therefore, must be connected to the Kane resistance. Clarke recalls those blurry photos of dark-dressed rebels hiding in the woods, perched with guns or moving quickly through the underbrush. What kind of movement is this resistance? Is it a handful of runaways following the lead of a lunatic anarchist? Or something more sophisticated?

She needs more time with the computer access, though she knows there’s no way she’s going to get it. If they try using that same combination of Finn’s badge and her mother’s code, she’s sure the security servers will recognize that Saturday night was not an anomaly, but a pattern. She’ll be caught. Honestly, Clarke’s surprised no one has questioned her about Saturday yet. Perhaps she and Bellamy were truly careful enough.

Bellamy. She hasn’t gotten to speak to him since they parted ways Saturday evening, and it’s been eating at her. She needs to verbalize her thoughts, needs to bounce ideas off another person or they’ll be bottled up too tightly inside of her. Not to mention, things felt… strange, after she’d kissed him to
throw off the guard. He’d become quiet, shut off. If she’d thought that kissing him with be that off-putting, that gross to him, then of course she wouldn’t have done it. But at the end of the day, it got the guard off their backs. That’s what frustrates Clarke. She knows it was the right call and a smart idea.

The water shuts off abruptly, the shower panel beeping to indicate that her allotted shower timer has run up. Like everything else in Arkadia, water usage is strictly regulated, and she really doesn’t want to spend the extra credits to extend the timer. The chill thrusts her back into the present, and she reaches beyond the glass shower door for a towel.

Five minutes later, Clarke is clothed and rubbing out her damp hair with a towel. Lost in her thoughts, she meanders into the kitchen and nearly drops the towel when she sees her mother sitting at the kitchen counter.

“You’re home?”

Abby finishes a sip from her mug and nods. “The surgery took twice as long as I was expecting. Almost fourteen hours. It was urgent so we had to work through the night.”

Clarke can see the deep lines of exhaustion around Abby’s mouth and eyes. “What was the patient?”

“Border guard.”

“Border guard? With life threatening injuries?”

“I didn’t say life threatening.”

“They wouldn’t make you work fourteen hours through the night if the injuries weren’t life threatening. What happened?”

“I don’t know the details, Clarke. Animal attack or something.” Abby rubs her eyes, and Clarke can tell by the tone in her voice that she does know the details, but can’t share them. Sometimes Clarke forgets that she’s not supposed to know as much as she does. And she certainly knows more than her mother is aware of.

“Sorry you were up so late.”

“Not your fault. When are you scheduled to go in?”

Clarke grabs a ration bowl of instant oatmeal and pops it in the flash oven. “Not until nine. Jackson has me mostly on standard patient check-ins, but I’ll be assisting on another surgery as a shadow today. Sounds like he’s trying to transition me over to more of the operating team.”

“Of course. I told him to do so.” Abby speaks with a confidence like absolutely nothing could ever surprise her.

If only she knew.

The flash oven beeps and Clarke retrieves her bowl. The oatmeal is bland and lumpy but she’s used to it. “It’s nice to have a little variety in my work schedule. And I’m glad to see that they trust me enough to increase my responsibilities.”

“You’re our strongest graduate apprentice, you’re doing very well. And I’m not just saying that because I’m biased.” Abby gives her daughter a proud little smile, and Clarke forces one back, feeling heat rise in her cheeks. “I’m serious, Clarke. I’m proud of you. I know how hard you’ve been
working for this, and it’s exciting to see all the hard work paying off. Everyone at the clinic agrees that you’re very promising.”

Abby isn’t usually one to heap on praise, making Clarke feel all the more guilty for how she’s been spending her spare time lately.

Abby places her mug in the sink. “I’m going to try and get some sleep, I need to be in again this afternoon for meetings.” She’s halfway into the hallway when she calls over your shoulder. “Oh, and Wells left a few messages for you. They were still marked as unread when I got to them, you might want to take a listen.”

“Wait, when?” Clarke drops her spoon into her dish with a clatter, taking three large steps to reach for the wall phone – a luxury for anyone wealthy enough to afford one. She’s been so busy at the clinic that she’d completely forgotten to check for any messages. And from Wells, too. Maybe he’s been notified about his badge being used in the administrative building on Foundation Day. Shit!

Pressing the receiver to her ear, Clarke listens to the messages. There are three from the past two days, and they’re all similar: *Come quickly. Something has happened to Raven.*

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“*Arrested?*” Clarke’s brows shoot up and her jaw feels slack. “What the hell happened?”

When Clarke finally called Wells back, he told her to meet him and Finn at his house. They stand in a cluster in Wells’s yard. Wells looks distraught, but Finn looks outright pale and ashy.

“I tried to tell you sooner,” Wells says.

“I know, and I’m sorry. I’ve been tied up at the clinic and distracted and I missed your calls and forgot to look for messages.” Clarke’s breathing too quickly. “When did this happen?”

“Foundation Day,” Finn says bleakly. “It was my fault. I got extra drink tokens and thought we’d just have a good time. But Raven got wasted and she got… controversial.”

“What did she do?”

“It was what she *said*,” answers Wells.

“She started going off about her job and her asshole superiors.” Finn explains, “But then she starts railing on the system itself for sorting her as a Heart, and talking about Heart oppression, and she got carried away.”

Wells glances around, like his father might have listening ears in the yard. He whispers, “She said… she said *fuck the system.*”

“Holy shit.” This is worse than Clarke could’ve thought. “And they arrested her for making a scene?”

“Of course,” Finn says. “I mean, it was *really* public. Plenty of people heard it, and they tried to shut her up but it only made it worse.”

“How could you have missed it? I feel like the entire City Center probably heard her. Where were you?” Wells asks.

Clarke had some crafted excuse in the back of her mind, but now she’s struggling to drag it up and actually enunciate it. “I got—I was tied up with some stuff at the clinic, and I got there late and I
wasn’t planning on being late but – but it just kind of happened.” She speaks quickly to change the focus. “Have you heard any updates? I’m assuming they’re keeping her in the incarceration center temporarily. Is there any hearing, any trial?”

“I’ve been to the incarceration center four times,” Finn says, “But there aren’t any updates yet. For something like this, I don’t think they’ll give her a trial.”

“So what does this mean for her?” Clarke asks, looking between her two friends. She’s never seen an arrest for a public display of defiance, or what’s to follow afterwards. “What are the consequences?”

Finn puts his hands up, palms out and empty. “Don’t look at me, I don’t have a clue.” He turns to Wells. “You’re the one in the administrative side of things.”

Wells swallows. “I don’t know a lot about how they’ll charge her. But… from what I’ve heard, these things aren’t taken lightly. At the very least she’ll be penalized heavily with a loss of credits and probably her job. They’ll probably want to keep her locked up and then go through the rehabilitation process, but no one really explains much about that to me.”

Clarke’s stomach feels hollow and icy. “They’re not going to go easy on her. Not if she started publicly ranting about the sorting system. They’ll take that seriously.”

“So what are you saying?” Finn asks desperately. “They’ll charge her for treason or something?”

“I don’t know!” Clarke wraps her arms tight across her chest, hugging her body close as the ground starts to sway. Raven was arrested. One of her best friends. Before Becca’s journal, she’d assume that Raven would be imprisoned for a bit, placed on fair trial, and rehabilitated before returning to society. Now, Clarke knows better. She remembers Becca’s suspicions about people “disappearing” who weren’t really disappearing. She understands that Raven, as a young and popular Heart who said some very controversial things, poses a threat to the council.

Now, Clarke may never see Raven again.

“I should’ve been there.” The words slip from her lips before she has time to catch them. “I should’ve been there. Maybe I could’ve helped talk her down, or even tried to talk to the guards?”

“Finn tried talking her down,” Wells says. “And believe me, there’s no way those guards would’ve listened.”

Of course. Yes, Clarke was the daughter of an important councilwoman, but Wells was the son of the Chancellor. If even he couldn’t have prevented this…

“I could’ve tried something. This is Raven, this is my friend.”

“I know.” Finn places a comforting hand on Clarke’s back. “But we’ll – we’ll figure something out. I don’t know what, but I’m not letting them take her without a bit of a fight.”

Clarke nods, and her stomach again fills with dread at the thought of her other friends fighting back. What could they possibly do? Did they understand the magnitude of the Council’s power? What they were willing to do to their own people? She wouldn’t risk losing another friend.

Finn sees the look of fear on her face and mistakes it for grief. “Hey,” he says openly, earnestly. She can see the rim of red around his own eyes. “It’s not your fault, Clarke. There’s nothing you could’ve done. Like you said, you were tied up at work and you couldn’t have known this was happening. There’s nothing any of us could’ve done, really.”
But from the corner of her eye, Clarke notices Wells watching her strangely. His face is neutral, but she sees something in his gaze.

Suspicion?

Bellamy is grateful his shifts on Tuesday finish before it gets dark outside. On another day he might have the energy to take a more scenic route home, taking quiet notice of the changing seasons painted on the leaves of the trees. But today, he feels more exhausted than usual. Physically, and mentally. It’s like the burden of knowing about the Kane files is weighing heavy on his mind, his shoulders and back.

He’s just focusing on the simple task of walking home, looking forward to getting off his feet and eating something. Even if it’s a meager portion of basic rations, some meat composite or instant soup stew or something. He’s not picky at this point - he’s never had the luxury of being a picky eater.

Bellamy finally makes it to his front step, digging in his pocket for his key. The house once had a working scanner panel for entry, but the thing was old before Bellamy and Octavia even moved in and it hasn’t worked for years now. Bellamy keeps the door latched with a manual lock he’d picked up a while back. Most Hearts do; few can afford to repair broken scanner panels, and the poorer neighborhoods are not without the occasional break-in.

Unlocking the door, the first thing Bellamy registers is Octavia at the kitchen table. She’s got her feet propped up on a second chair, but her body is turned towards the door even when her head looks away. She’s been waiting for him.

He enters in silence, listening for a quick accusation or question. Nothing comes. “How was your day?” He asks.

She shrugs. “The same. Time crawls by when you’re scanning boxes all day. But if it earns me credits, I suppose it’s not too bad. There are worse jobs to have.”

Bellamy thinks of the bedpans he’s had the honor of rinsing out today at the clinic, and he shudders. But he also measures Octavia’s voice: there’s nothing hostile or confrontational in it. So maybe she wasn’t necessarily waiting for him.

“Did you eat already?” He asks her. By his calculation, she came home half an hour before him.

She shakes her head. “Not hungry.”

“You going out tonight?”

Weirdly enough, she scoffs. Like this is some absurd suggestion, which – for Octavia’s social habits – it absolutely isn’t. “Where would I be going?”

“I don’t know, wherever you usually go with your friends.” He crosses into the kitchen and opens a cupboard, digging through for a ration packet that doesn’t look disgusting.

“Nice to know you really listen, Bell.”

“You’re an adult now. I like to think I can trust you a little bit.”

“That’s bull,” she grumbles under her breath. He’s still trying to pin down her mood when she asks, “Where are you going tonight?”

Octavia picks at a fraying spot on her jeans. “No reason, I just assumed you’d have somewhere to be or something…”

“I don’t usually go out on a weeknight.”

“You have been more.”

“Really?” He turns around, arms folded. “Out with it, O.”

“No Clarke tonight?”

Just the thing he needed today. He rolls his eyes. “That’s what this is about?”

“You tell me.”

“O, we’ve hung out maybe two, three times? It’s not a regular thing.”

“Bullshit, you know that’s a lie. She’s been over here at least two times, and I’m sure you’ve seen her a lot at the clinic.” Octavia’s brow is furrowed – that classic Blake battle mask – but her emotions are still hard to read.

“It’s nothing.” He goes back to searching for rations, hiding his face in the cabinet.

“Really? Because I don’t remember a lot from the night I got shot, but I remember you two were pretty much at each other’s throats the whole time. You thought I was insane to suggest going to Clarke in the first place.”

“Understandable.”

“And suddenly now it’s like you’re two old pals? Bellamy, you didn’t even know this girl and you hated her. It’s like that flipped overnight. From what? Passing in the hallway at the clinic?”

“She really helped us out, O. She pried a bullet out of your arm and sewed you back up, and she kept her mouth shut about it.”

“So, what, you owe her now or something?”

He spins around. “What are you insinuating?”

“I don’t know, Bell. I’m just trying to figure out why you two are suddenly so close? I mean, be straight with me, are you screwing or not? Because I’d like a warning since I have to live with you.”

“Jesus, Octavia, are you kidding me?” Bellamy’s certain he’s red as a tomato.

“No, I’m not. Is that a yes?”

“No, no. We’re not screwing, no. You happy now?”

“But you’d like to?”

“Like to what?”

Octavia levels him with a frustrated stare. “Sleep with Clarke Griffin.”

“Do you really have to go there, O?” He’s making an effort not to ramble and embarrass himself
further. “Do you really have to reduce every female friendship I have to sex?”

“Yeah, because you have so many female friends. So many friends, period.”

“That’s uncalled for.”

“Fine, so you have a friend.” Octavia throws her hands up. “I don’t get why it’s Clarke Griffin, though. I mean, you two couldn’t be more different. She’s my age, Bell, and she’s a Head. A doctor at the clinic. What could you two possibly have in common?”

“Like I’ve said, we’ve hung out a few times. It’s not like we’re soul-searching together or something. Calm down.”

“You’ve been acting weird lately, that much is obvious,” she says frankly. “You’re out more than usual, and then there’s the whole Clarke thing. Not to mention… you said you were at work during the storm, right?”

He swallows, recalling his alibi. “Yes.”

“I stayed over at Finn and Raven’s that night, so I didn’t notice it until I came home in the morning and you were still asleep. But you’d tracked mud all over the floor from your boots and I was cleaning it up, and there was hay everywhere. In the mud tracks, stuck into the grooves of your boot soles. Bellamy, why would there be hay at the clinic?”

He doesn’t know what to say. “Are you serious?”

“Umm, yeah, I’m serious. Because the only place I can imagine there being enough hay for you to track it all the way home is, like, out in the agricultural district?”

Bellamy grabs a random packet of rations and opens it up. A skimpy cup of granola mix. Not at all what he was looking for, but he needs some place to avert his gaze from Octavia. “What do you want me to say, O?”

“Just tell the truth. Would you please look at me?”

Slowly he turns, but he focuses his eyes on her hands and not her face. “I got caught in the storm and it was really bad out, so I ended up waiting it out in a barn.”

“That’s your excuse?” There’s pure skepticism across her features now.

“It’s not an excuse, it’s the truth. Where else would there be so much hay?”

“Bellamy, why were you in a barn? That’s nowhere near the clinic, that’s so far out of the way! How could you just end up on the other side of Arkadia?”

“It’s a long story, and I don’t really want to get into it. So can you just butt out of it? Why does it even matter?”

“Was Clarke there?”

He slams his hands onto the kitchen counter. “Why would you assume she’s there? Why would it matter?”

“Because I like to think my brother isn’t a dumbass, but since you just randomly wound up in a barn during a hurricane I should be a little worried that you’re not chasing after some preppy little blond and doing dumb shit to woo her or something. Because, honestly, I’m running out of plausible
explanations besides that.”

“I’m not chasing after Clarke Griffin!” Bellamy doesn’t realize how loud his voice has become until his words ring out in the small kitchen.

“Listen, I’m sure she’s not a horrible person. Like you said, she fixed my arm. And she’s friends with Finn and Raven. But—” Octavia’s voice drifts off, suddenly consumed by a different thought.

“But what?”

He’s not expecting what she says next. “Raven got arrested.”

“Reyes? Arrested for what?”

“Getting drunk and calling the Council and their precious system out on their bullshit. She did it in public, though, and made a huge scene.”

“Shit. They having a trial or just a sentencing?”

“No one knows. But we both know how the justice system works here, and I don’t think there’s going to be anyone advocating on her behalf.” Octavia gets up from her seat. “You always tell me to be careful, and now it’s my turn.”

“I am careful.”

“Not enough.” She shakes her head. “Raven’s arrest is just another reminder that we’re all trapped in this stupid system. And since we’re Hearts, it’s even worse. People like Clarke – they’re from a different world from you and me. We both see it.”

“Of course I know that.”

“There’s a reason they work so hard to divide Heads and Hearts. Their system can only work if the lines aren’t crossed. And I know I’m your sister so maybe I see more than most people, but the last thing you’d want is people asking questions because suddenly you’re spending a lot of time around Councilwoman Griffin’s daughter.”

“Octavia, she’s just a friend,” he says, trying to sound dismissive. “There’s really nothing you need to worry about.”

He forces himself to look casual as he stabs a spoon into his skimpy pouch of granola.

Clarke, meanwhile, comes home to a scene that chills her to the very core.

She’s barely got both feet in the doorway when she hears her mother’s voice call to her. “Clarke, is that you?”

“Of course, who else would it be?” She answers without thinking, tugging off her jacket and hanging it on a hook by the door.

When she turns around, she sees her mother sitting on the living room couch next to Alie Pramheda.

Clarke’s blood runs cold. Her heart skips a beat and her stomach rises in her throat. Alie Pramheda is one of those figures who is unmistakable at a distance. Upon close, it’s like her edges are too sharp
and her colors too bright. Her dress is a more vibrant shade of red than anyone in Arkadia should be able to afford. Her hair is slicked back into the tightest, longest ponytail Clarke’s ever seen, and it pulls the skin back off the sharp angles of her face. She’s even got red lacquer on her lips, a shameless display of wealth and status. No one bothers with lipstick in Arkadia, but Alie wears it like blood on her smile.

Abby remains seated, stiff-backed and uncomfortable. She motions a hand towards her guest. “Clarke, you remember Councilwoman Pramheda.”

“Yes,” Clarke’s voice is void of emotion or inflection. She addresses Alie. “I knew your sister.”

Alie’s gaze is unflinching. “Of course. I’m well aware of your status as a successful young medic at the clinic. From my reports, you gave my sister the most excellent care while she was your patient.”

“I did,” Clarke answers quickly. “Her death was a horrible tragedy.”

*Did you have your own sister murdered?*

“It truly was.” Clarke expects to see some emotion on Alie’s face, even forced sadness, but there’s nothing. Just that eerie neutral expression and a stare that feels like it can see into your mind. “As horrible as her death was, I’m not here to talk about my sister. Please sit down, Miss Griffin.”

*No.*

Clarke wants to refuse. Every nerve in her body is trying to, but she forces herself to sit on the uncomfortable ottoman across the from the couch, keeping the low-lying coffee table between herself and Alie. She’s well aware of her mother watching her like a hawk.

*Alie knows that I broke into the administrative building. They must have identified me on the cameras, or from the login combinations. I’ve been caught.*

No one in the room speaks or relaxes. Alie’s posture is inhumanly straight, bending only slightly as she reaches for a cup of coffee on the table – no doubt a gesture of awkward hospitality from Abby. Alie sips once, returns it to the table, and speaks crisply.

“Miss Griffin, I’m here to address some of your recent behavior in the last few weeks. There was a particular incident a few nights ago that attracted some attention, and on behalf of the rest of the Council I’m coming to you as a representative of the governing powers here within Arkadia.”

Mirroring Alie’s icy tone of voice, Clarke turns to her mother. *You let her in here.* “And what does that make you?”

“Clarke, this is serious.”

“Yes, Clarke,” Alie repeats, and hearing the woman speak her first name sickens Clarke. “You are a young Head of notable birth and exceptional intelligence. You graduated at the top of your class and have an extremely bright future ahead of you. Naturally, the Council has taken great notice of you. At the same time, I – among others – feel it is my duty to approach a young person of your potential and do everything within my expansible power to prevent you from… shall, I say, tarnishing your golden opportunities? To prevent your brilliant mind from being perverted and, thus, ruined.”

Clarke’s struggling to keep up this charade of calm. “Mom, what is she talking about?”

“There was a report filed about an… an *incident* Saturday night, at the Foundation Day celebration.”
Clarke’s out of lies, out of excuses. “I’m sure whatever that report says, it’s blowing things completely out of the water. It was nothing!”

Alie cuts her off. “It was brought to our attention that you were found in an intimate situation with a mister Bellamy Blake, Heart.”

Clarke swings her mouth open but no sound comes out. *Intimate situation? Bellamy Blake? This is not at all* what she was expecting. “I… what?”

“The guard reported you two were found in a stairwell and it was unclear how long you’d been there together. Naturally, it warranted notice.”

It’s like Clarke’s brain is three steps behind, fumbling and trying to process the subtext in Alie’s clinical words. “Warranted notice – what are you even saying?”

“The situation dictated—”

“So I was caught kissing someone. Sure, embarrassing, but what about it warranted notice?” This was Clarke’s real test for Alie, her brain finally catching up and processing. Alie hadn’t bothered to focus on where Clarke had been seen with Bellamy – in a locked, restricted stairwell in the administrative building.

“Clarke, this might be difficult to understand,” Alie begins condescendingly. “But, among the many fair and necessary rules written into our Arkadian doctrine, there are some rules that go unspoken. Putting them down in writing would just be… redundant.”

*Alie didn’t take the bait.* Clarke would almost be relieved if she wasn’t still trying to follow Alie’s logic.

“More separates a Head from a Heart than answers on a personality test. Yes, the categories reveal something very important about the core nature of a person. And this, effectively, determines the type of life a person is predestined to live. Some people are born leaders, and some must follow. Our studies, and our human histories, have shown us that society functions best when the leaders are the ones exhibiting the traits of a Head, not a Heart.”

Clarke looks again towards her mother for some intervention, for *anything*. But Abby just sits there, held in place by the pure notion that, for all her power as a Councilwoman, Alie marginally has even more.

Because she has something controversial on Clarke.

“This is why we must keep Heads and Hearts at a slight distance from one another. At their very essence, they don’t understand each other. Fundamentally. As a result, there are the expected differences in class and occupation, which add another layer to this situation entirely.”

Clarke can’t hold back any longer. “What layer?” She spits out.

“Naturally you’re aware of Blake’s status, or lack thereof. From what my records show, he works as a janitor at the clinic. I would assume that’s where you met him.”

“Councilwoman Pramheda,” Abby finally interjects. “My daughter is very serious in her medical work. I can assure you she hasn’t been using the clinic for romantic endeavors.”

“Romantic endeavors, what are you *talking about*?” Clarke cries. “More importantly, *why the hell* is this even being discussed in a meeting?”
“Because, Clarke,” Alie says firmly. “When a notable Head like yourself displays such a flagrant interest in a Heart who – indisputably, is far beneath your rank and status – the Council takes some concerned notice.”

Clarke can’t find the words. Unsurprisingly, Alie takes this as an invitation to keep talking.

“A few years from now, maybe even sooner than that, you’ll move out of this house and start living on your own. It is expected, even highly recommended, that you start thinking about successful relationships and eventual long-term partnerships. For someone of your extreme potential, I cannot encourage enough that you look for a happy, healthy relationship with another well-to-do Head like yourself.”

Abby clearly sees the shock and disgust written on her daughter’s face. “Clarke, I know this sounds like some sort of matchmaking, or even meddling in your personal life. But, truly, that isn’t the case.”

“My studies have shown that matches between like-sorted partners are at least two times more likely to be successful than a union between a Head and a Heart. It comes down to brain chemistry.”

**Brain chemistry?**

“And, to put it simply, the systems in place ensuring Arkadia’s prosperity work best when there is this slight, natural division between Heads and Hearts. We cannot completely outlaw relationships between categories, of course, that would be too blatant. Instead this is one of those ‘unspoken rules’. More like social etiquette than doctrine.”

The silence that follows is as charged as the air just before a lightning strike. Clarke keeps both feet firmly rooted to the ground to keep herself from sending a shoe into the glass coffee table. For the same reason, she presses her nails deep into her palm and far from Alie’s frozen face.

“So you’re telling me… that you deemed it necessary to stage an *intervention* with me… because you’re afraid that I’m going ruin these predetermined plans you have for me… by being with a *Heart*?”

Alie reaches for her coffee and takes another slow sip. “You’re a bright girl, surely you understand it’s more complicated than that.”

“I don’t see how it’s *any* more complicated than that.”

“As the daughter of two very-successful people, it is your birthright and responsibility to follow suit as similarly respectable. You’ve had every aspect of the proper upbringing to make you a truly model Arkadian – except, perhaps for your father’s suicide, but that’s an unfortunate speedbump on an otherwise perfect journey.”

Finally these words seem to bring some life back into Abby. She recoils from Alie, horrified the woman would mention Jake’s death so casually in his old home.

Clarke springs to her feet. “Don’t you dare talk about my father’s death like that, you *bitch*!”

“Clarke!” Abby cries, but Clarke turns on her.

“Why did you let her in here? Why do you let her say these things? You know this whole intervention is nonsense, Mom, I know you do!”

“Clarke, she is a Councilwoman and therefore she is your superior.”
“Please, Abby,” Alie interrupts. “I knew to expect this sort of reaction. My findings can be considered ‘controversial’, especially to young people. Of course, this outburst only heightens my fears about the damaging impacts on one’s character than comes with spending too much time with the opposite category.”

Clarke takes a step towards Abby, the edge of the coffee table digging into her shins. “Excuse me?”

“Such an emotional outburst. You’re already showing negative Heart tendencies.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

Clarke’s words finally seem to have some effect on Alie, who shifts her posture slightly but still doesn’t change that mask of a face. “This is very discouraging behavior, Miss Griffin. I expressed these concerns to you on the expectation that you would act rationally and civilly. This, of course, is not the kind of information that can be shared freely in Arkadia.”

“And give me one good reason I should keep my mouth shut.”

“Because you would hate to see Bellamy Blake punished for your indiscretions.”

It’s like someone bent down and pulled the living room rug out from under Clarke’s feet. She feels her vision narrow. “This isn’t his fault. None of it.”

“Unfortunately, few would believe that.”

“You can’t threaten me.”

“I’m not. I’m just reminding you of the vulnerable situation Blake is in. As is his sister, and your friends. Really, Miss Griffin, I don’t think you want to know the lengths I’m willing to go to keep this quiet.”

“You’re a monster.”

“Powerful people are often called monsters by those who don’t understand the burden of governing.”

Clarke takes a step back and jabs a finger at the door. “Leave this house.”

“I am not finished, Miss Griffin.”

“Your message has been received. I refuse to admit to or promise anything. I’m sure you and your spies will increase your surveillance of me, as can only be expected since apparently I’m so goddamn interesting to you. In the meantime, get out of my house.”

Both Alie and Abby rise at the same time. The red-clad Councilwoman turns to Clarke’s mother. “Surely you understand what I’m trying to say.”

Abby’s voice tries to be firm, but trembles slightly. “You heard my daughter. You’ve said what you came here to say. Now please leave us.”

Alie waits, as if expecting Abby to change her mind. She doesn’t. Seeing no further options, Alie walks to the front door and lets herself out.

Clarke wants to collapse. She’s been so tightly wound since she came home, and now the coils of energy and anger and disgust have released all at once and left her completely spent. She sees something fall in her mother too. Her posture becomes heavy, head slumping forward into her open palms. Keeping her gaze away from her daughter, Abby leaves the room and heads towards the
kitchen.

“Oh no,” Clarke cries out, following quickly. “We are not done.”

“What do you want me to say, Clarke?”

“Why did you even let her in here? Why did you let her say those things? I mean, that’s insane. She’s insane.”

Abby spun around, eyes wet. “You think I had a choice? No, I can’t stand the woman. But we’re both on the Council. I have to work with her, it’s not like I could exactly go against her. She has a stronger influence in Arkadia than you could ever know.”

“I’m your daughter. You allowed her to talk to me like that?”

“I didn’t like it. But… but I understand why the Council would take notice, Clarke, this happens from time to time.”

“Not you too!” Clarke reaches for the hair at her scalp. “Don’t tell me you actually believe that bullshit.”

“I don’t know if I do,” Abby begins. “But there is something to be said about mixed-category couples. You don’t see a lot of them, because most times they don’t work. It’s human nature.”

“But is it really that bad that it warrants a report filed by the Council? Are they really that worried about Heads and Hearts together?”

“I—I don’t know.”

“You’re on the goddamn Council! How could you not know?”

“Clarke, that is enough!”

“What?” she cries back, “What is so bad about this?”

“You sound just like your father!” Abby’s words echo off the sterile kitchen walls.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing.”

“No, that’s not nothing.” Clarke surges forward, blood racing in her ears. “What does Dad have to do with this?” Silence. “Mom, talk to me, please!”

Abby sinks into a stool. Her voice is quieter, more restrained. “Your father would ask the same questions. Among… among other questions. And they were always dangerous.”

“What could be so dangerous about a mere question?”

“It’s dangerous when our entire world rests upon one idea.” Abby’s words become faster, rushing together like she can’t get them out fast enough. “Because everything around us, everything we have is here because we follow one little rule: be sorted into Heads and Hearts, and let the system determine how our life will play out. That’s what separates us from the anarchy outside Arkadia’s walls. And it’s one tiny, paper-thin rule. When someone starts to puncture it with questions, even seemingly harmless ones…”
Clarke hangs onto her mother’s words desperately. “So you’re saying that’s what Dad did?”

“Your father… he always had his doubts about the effectiveness of a sorting system. He legitimately thought it didn’t work. He was sorted as a Head, of course, but some part of him always felt that it was wrong. That a person can be both at the same time, and just because a test decides that you’re more of one than the other, it shouldn’t be taken as an absolute.” Abby stares down at her fingers. “Of course, this is a very controversial thing to think, let alone say out loud. But your father was never very worried about being caught saying the wrong thing. He got careless.”

In what Clarke remembered of her father, he was never careless. “He doesn’t sound wrong. If the test could be incorrect, or too binary to accurately reflect a person, then their entire life would be structured according to a lie. It could keep them in poverty or trap them in a position they’re not actually qualified for.”

“I always told him that there were measures in place to keep that from happening, to make sure everyone finds where they belong and best fit. That the category system is about recognizing the true essence of a person’s identity, not about locking them into a mold.”

“But let me guess, he didn’t believe you?”

“He didn’t listen.” Abby’s words are sad, yes, but tinged with anger. Something long repressed. Is she angry at Dad? At herself?

“And it was enough to drive him to end his life?”

Clarke expected to see the pain of loss paint itself across Abby’s features, as she normally looked whenever Jake’s death came up in conversation. Instead, her face remained tightly drawn. And there, for a flicker of an instant, something in Abby’s eyes.

Guilt?

“Mom, what are you not telling me?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You know something, I can tell. I can see it. And honestly, you owe me some truth after that debacle with Alie Pramheda.” Clarke presses on. “Tell me.”

“Clarke, your father loved you very, very much.”

“Mom?”

“And I love you, just like I loved him. I swear to you, I loved him.” Abby starts to cry. “I didn’t want to—I didn’t—”

“What are you saying?”

Abby’s voice is little more than a whisper now. “He believed something in Arkadia was truly broken. He – he filled his head with these dangerous thoughts and he wouldn’t stop. He wouldn’t stop seeing these problems and they consumed him. He was going to go public. He knew that he was a powerful, well-respected figure in the community. He knew that people would listen to him if he started saying that the category system was a lie. That Arkadia was founded on a web of lies.”

“Go public?”
“He was working out a way to broadcast his message across the whole town, but I was so worried. All he’d need to do was step out into City Center and start saying these things, and with his credibility behind him, people would believe him. Even if they arrested him, it would be too late. Your father… he was magnetic. People listened to him, they trusted him. And,” Abby chokes out. “He held the power to tear everything to shreds.”

Clarke sees the pieces fall together, forming the outline of the truth. Just enough so where she knew exactly what it all meant without hearing it outright. “Mom, what did you do?”

“He left me no choice, Clarke. If he’d gone public, there would be riots in the street. People would be hurt, killed. The fragile peace we’ve worked so hard to build would shatter.”

“You turned him in.”

It all comes crashing down around Clarke.

“He left me no choice. I went to the Council, I had to tell them everything. There was talk of arresting him, but it was unclear who else he’d shared these views with. If he had followers, they’d come out in full force behind him. Arresting him or sentencing him to death would just make a martyr, another symbol for these insurgents to follow. So, the Council had to target his image. They settled on a staged suicide. Frame it to make it seem like Jake was, deep down, a very troubled man. Anyone who looked up to him and his beliefs would see a tortured man who couldn’t bear the burden of these thoughts.”

“No… no I don’t believe you.”

“I gave him a choice. I told him that he must promise – not just to me but to the Council – that he’d renounce these ideas and stay quiet. And I told him that otherwise, they’d find a way to have him silenced.”

“No.”

“He just told me, ‘I will never stay quiet.’”

Clarke struggles to find the words, find the air to breathe and speak and think. “You – you killed him. You turned him in and condemned him and killed him.”

“Clarke, I loved him so much.”

“How could you possibly say you loved him after what you did?”

“Because I wanted to protect you!” Abby cries out desperately. “He would’ve caused war to break out in Arkadia! A civil war! And who do you think the Council would try to punish after he went public? The person he loved more than anyone.”

“Don’t you dare,” Clarke gasps a heaving breath. “Don’t tell me he loved me, not when you took him away from me!”

“Everything I did, I did it to keep you safe.”

“You killed him. You destroyed this family. You’re nothing but a puppet for the Council!”

“I had to make the right decision. For my daughter, for Arkadia. For peace. It ripped my heart out. I had to play along with the lie, to everyone, to you. They left me no choice. They needed Arkadia to believe that Jake Griffin ended his own life, and it was the most pain I’ve ever felt.”
“I don’t care what you felt. You turned him in.”

“Clarke, listen---”

“You let me believe he chose to end it. You let me believe he chose to leave me, to leave us.”

“Clarke, you don’t understand!” Abby lunges forward, reaching for Clarke’s shoulders. Clarke recoils. “I couldn’t lose you.”

Clarke looks at her mother like she never knew the woman. She shakes her head slowly, taking another step back. “You already have.”

Turning faster than her mother can say anything, Clarke bolts out the door.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your continued support in reading/following/reviewing this story! I'd love to hear what you thought about this chapter -- I've struggled with dialogue in the past and this chapter was extremely dialogue-heavy and emotionally charged, so it was a fun challenge for me. Let me know what you think about this chapter, and hopefully I'll get the next one up soon.

-K.T.
Clarke keeps her curtain open that night.

It’s a pleasantly clear night, and the distant moon glows bright blue on the other side of the windowpane. Milky light filters in and settles gently on the floor and a patch of Clarke’s undisturbed comforter. She stares at the little square of light on the blanket, sitting upright with her knees drawn tight against her chest. She digs her chin onto her knee.

Tonight, darkness feels suffocating. It whispers to her and creeps down her spine. The blue of the moon brings a small comfort, like a swipe of watercolor paint across her room.

After leaving her mother in the kitchen, Clarke just started running. Sure, it was dark out and she was probably drawing too much attention. But she needed to be outside and away from that house, with its crisp, perfect rooms full of secrets and lies. There was something satisfying in the crunch of the gravel underfoot and the whipping brush of leaves as Clarke ran under low-hanging branches. She needed to hear, to smell, to feel. To feel anything but the blanket of numbness she’d always been so careful to force in times of real emotion.

It was just like at the clinic, when Becca died. Ten counts of grieving, then back to work. Except now, this wasn’t grief and sadness she felt.

It was… Clarke wasn’t sure what it was. She still isn’t, she realizes as she sits on her bed. She spent the evening literally running away from her problems, but now they still rattle around in her brain like birds trapped in a cage. She doesn’t want to see her mother. She doesn’t want to hear justifications and excuses and rationalizations. She doesn’t want to think.

She just wants to sit alone and feel.

Through the glass, Clarke can see the neighboring houses around them and the swaying trees beyond. She’s sure others could see her if they tried. Maybe she’s being spied on right now. What do I care? Clarke’s mind is the only place where she’s truly safe, where they can’t control her or censor her. At least, not yet. I’m sure they’re working on a way to do that too.
When she was running, her feet carried her a few blocks from Bellamy’s street. She told herself it wasn’t a conscious decision. After all, things were still a little strange between them. But there she was. And she started three steps into his direction when Alie’s voice rang out between her ears with horrible clarity.

“Because you would hate to see Bellamy Blake punished for your indiscretions.”

Alie would hurt Bellamy. Or Octavia, or Finn or Raven. Maybe even Wells, if really wanted to. At this point, Clarke was all but certain that Alie had orchestrated her own sister’s murder. Maybe there was no limit to how far she’d go to stay in power.

So Clarke turned around and came home. She didn’t bother with dinner, instead heading straight to her room and shutting the door. Which is where she’s been for the past several hours.

Alie wanted Clarke to stay away from Bellamy, for the sake of the status quo. Clarke’s certain that if she keeps seeing Bellamy, even without any romantic connotations, he’ll end up being punished for it. Maybe it’ll be a sudden and inexplicable demotion, or losing his job for some flimsy reason. Maybe he’ll be restationed at an even worse position far from the clinic, far from Clarke. But if Clarke starts to vocalize what Alie had said about these unspoken rules, then Alie will do worse. She could make him disappear.

How are we supposed to live like this? Trapped in the constant fear of stepping out of line and disappearing for it. Living under the guise of a happy, perfect community. But Clarke has seen enough to see right through all of that. And learning that her father, her father, was silenced for speaking his heart, for believing that a person could be more than their test result, more than one category…

It’s enough.

Clarke finally moves, lunging forward to drag her curtain shut with a quick pull. She rolls off the bed and towards her desk. Careful to open the drawer slowly and quietly, Clarke digs for that stack of school reports, rifling through until she finds that one notebook page. Unfolding it, Clarke’s eyes rake over her crude map of the land beyond Arkadia. She reaches for a pencil and begins to fill in the gaps. Her copied map includes a few features from inside Arkadia’s walls, so she could properly align the direction of the map. She adds in the main roads branching out from City Center, the clinic, the agricultural district, the approximate location of the graffiti, the hydroelectric dam.

The dam.

Clarke’s overactive, hyperaware brain fixes on the dam. Upfront, she doesn’t know much about it. In school, they learned a few basics about how the dam provided hydroelectric power for all of Arkadia and little beyond that. But that’s not what Clarke’s focusing on. This isn’t about what the dam is supposed to do. This is about John Murphy supposedly drowning in the dam and that theory of Octavia’s that maybe, just maybe, he hadn’t actually drowned but escaped. Clarke remembers standing in Bellamy’s kitchen, talking it over with him. Trying to sort out how someone could slip past the turbines and come up on the reservoir side. Back then, it had seemed crazy.

Now, after seeing that Kane file and being held hostage in Alie’s intervention, Clarke has seen her fair share of crazy. And suddenly, the idea of escaping Arkadia doesn’t seem so crazy after all.

For the first time in her life, Clarke lets herself really consider what life would be like beyond the wall. She knows that there are miles and miles of forest surrounding Arkadia, but what was beyond that? War-ravaged wastelands? Where would be the closest sources of water, besides the reservoir? What animals might live in those woods? What people?
If Kane’s resistance is really out in the woods, then they are ex-Arkadians and therefore can’t be total monsters, Clarke reasons with herself. She would have some common ground. Perhaps they’d take sympathy in her cause, as an Arkadian defector. Besides, if she came armed with Becca Pramheda’s journal, maybe that would be enough to hold their attention.

But she was Clarke Griffin, daughter of a councilwoman. Any rebel who was a first-generation defector would recognize Clarke’s last name and council ties. She’d have to convince them to trust her, to let her in. Otherwise… Clarke recalls the blurry images of rifles.

Still, what could she do? Forget everything? Clarke can’t imagine dropping all of this and forcing herself into a life of submission. Playing the part of a good little Head under Alie and the council’s watchful eye. Staying silent through the injustices she sees playing out around her, trying to forget the secrets and lies she’s stumbled upon. All of that bottled up inside her would drive her crazy. For a moment, Clarke imagines this must be how her father felt.

Did he ever dream of running away? Did he ever make plans to leave Arkadia? Clarke can’t remember him mentioning it, even hypothetically Maybe he knew he couldn’t convince Abby to leave, or couldn’t safely get all three of them out. And he would never have chosen to leave Clarke.

But her mother and the council had chosen to let Clarke believe he did.

Her mind is set. She knows what she must do, where she has to go. Now, it’s just a matter of sorting out how.

Octavia sees her first at work.

She’s in the warehouse unloading a shipment of grains trucked in from the agricultural district. It involves scanning each wooden crate, then individually scanning every bag of grain before placing them on a dolly to be carted away and sorted. It’s mind numbing and back straining work, bending and scanning and bending and scanning. Even in the drafty warehouse Octavia feels beads of sweat collect along her hairline. She stands up to tuck her hair behind her ear when she sees a strange procession file into the warehouse. There’s the warehouse manager and his assistant, plus three unfamiliar figures. Two are dressed cleanly, but in a way that suggests that they’re construction managers or architects. The third wears a dress as red as blood.

Octavia looks away quickly, knowing it’s not wise to stare. Especially not at Alie Pramheda. The council is largely despised throughout the impoverished underbelly of Arkadia, but there are all sort of frightening rumors about Alie that set her apart.

Out of her peripheral vision, Octavia notices how the strange party keeps looking up around the warehouse ceiling. The construction managers seem to be pointing out something in the building’s structure, and they look to Alie repeatedly for approval. She just carries on with that same emotionless face. Octavia puts her head down.

It’s a few minutes later when Octavia hears the clicking of heels from behind her. Looking forward, she notices the other construction and warehouse managers a few paces away, talking amongst themselves, but she knows Alie stands over her shoulder. She turns.

“Councilwoman Pramheda,” she says stiffly. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“Oh, no,” Alie answers. “Just a routine labor and facilities inspection.” She eyes Octavia, holding eye contact and blinking a few times. Seconds feel uncomfortably long. “You are Octavia Blake, aren’t you?”
“Yes,” Octavia says hesitantly. Why would Alie Pramheda know her name, or care?

“Of course.” Alie’s smile is tight and forced. “You have a distinctive, memorable face. Keep up the good work, Miss Blake.”

Alie is gone before Octavia can even process what just happened.

The second time Octavia sees her, she’s walking home alone.

With summer slipping away into autumn and the days growing shorter, nightfall comes sooner. It’s dark by the time Octavia gets out of her later shift. Usually, she has no problem with walking home alone, even in the dark. She’s quick and smart, and her small size lets her hide places if she needed to. And a few times, she’s needed to.

That night isn’t an unusual one. It’s overcast overhead, blotting out the moon and keeping the light restricted to the blue-white glow of the streetlamps and any light from within homes and buildings. Off in the far distance, though she can’t see them well, Octavia knows there are hills. Far beyond the wall. As always, they’re dark.

Octavia walks with her senses up, but doesn’t feel anything strange. She’s just crossed onto the corner of her street, only a few dozen yards from home now. Suddenly, it’s like all of the hairs at the back of her neck stand up. Curious, she turns around.

There’s a car parked across the street. Cars in Arkadia are very rare and few between. Most are rovers used at the border, or trucks for transporting goods across town. A few cars belong to the Council, used in special cases of formality – or at least that’s how they’re supposed to be used. This one is black and sleek, a pre-war luxury. Electric, like all the cars in Arkadia. Octavia can count with one hand the number of times she’s seen a car like this.

She stares.

The car hums to life, barely making any mechanical sounds. The driver keeps the lights off and the car slides forward, passing on the far side of the street. As it does, the reflection of the streetlamp on the tinted passenger window shifts, and Octavia can glimpse a face inside.

Alie Pramheda, staring right back at her.

Is she being watched? Followed? Octavia finishes her trek home at a little jog and closes the curtains as soon as she gets inside.

Clarke sits in an uncomfortable plastic chair, head in her hands and eyes shut. Tendrils of her hair fall from her once-tidy braid, brushing her forehead. Her stomach feels empty but she can’t imagine eating anything right now.

Everything just feels too much right now. Her scrubs are too scratchy against her skin. The typical clinic odors – of antiseptic and plastic and refiltered air – are too strong. Even though it’s relatively quiet in this hallway, not a popular wing of the clinic, the lack of sound rings most in Clarke’s ears.

Behind her and to her right is the closed door to the operating room. There’s no window, and she can’t hear anything through the thick wall. She’s completely cut off.

Lifting her head off her hands, she notices them trembling, just slightly. It just makes things worse. In the back of her head, Clarke hears her mother talking to a younger, more hopeful Clarke. “Shaky
“hands are a curse to a surgeon.” She would say. “The best thing you can do is learn to shut it down now. If you practice, you won’t have this problem.”

Well here is Clarke, after several years of education and maturity and practice, and her hands still tremble. She’s only human, though people tend to forget that.

Time moves strangely in that chair. There’s a clock further down the hall, but it’s just beyond Clarke’s view. She supposes she could go back to the locker room and fetch her watch, since she had to remove all personal items in the operating room. But she wants to stay here and wait for news.

After an eternity, the door swings open quietly. Jackson slips through, pushing his mask down off his face. He shuts the door closed behind him.

Clarke jumps up. “Well?”

Jackson’s face says it before his words do. “We did all we could, but we lost him.”

All the air leaves Clarke’s lungs at once. She sinks back into her chair, feeling leaden. “Six years old,” she whispers.

He is – was only a little boy. Six years old, tiny in size. They’d found a strange mass in his left flank and needed to remove it. Clarke remembers him, awake and nervous, sitting on the operating table before they administered the anesthesia. She remembers his father saying goodbye, with watery eyes and a shaking voice as he promised his son he’d see him as soon as he woke up.

He wouldn’t wake up.

“When Clarke, I know this is hard, but I think we need to talk about you for a minute.” Jackson says softly. The last thing Clarke wants anyone to do right now is talk more about her. “You’re on your way to being a very skilled doctor, don’t get me wrong. And you’ve been doing really fine work here over the past several months. But what happened inside that room… that was unusual.”

“It was my fault, wasn’t it?” It has to be, and Clarke knows it. This wasn’t her first surgery she had actually worked on, not just observed. Here, she was tasked with helping hold open the incision site and keep other parts out of the way. But she made a mistake. She’d grabbed the wrong tool to use, something pointer. As she’d been doing her job, she didn’t realize her tool was slashing into another organ. By the time she noticed the strange swell and bleeding, it had changed everything. He was losing too much blood, and his body started going into shock. Realizing her error, Clarke had panicked, shaking and becoming emotional. Jackson had sent her from the room while the rest of the team stayed behind to try and save the boy.

“Tool mix-ups can happen. I’ve just never seen you do that before, even in training.”

“Don’t spare me, Jackson. It was my error that killed a kid.” Clarke’s voice sounds empty and dead itself. “I was careless. I should’ve noticed.”

“It was a tricky location, the bleeding site. The rest of the team struggled to find it.”

“Here you all are, cleaning up my mess.”

“Clarke.” Jackson kneels in front of her seat, looking her in the eyes. “Part of the job means knowing the risk that things can go wrong. Sometimes it’s out of our control, even if it’s our mistake. We won’t report this as a malpractice, so your record will be fine. But I think it might be best to keep you off the operating teams for a little while. Maybe repeat some shadowing or training.”
“Fair,” Clarke answers, still feeling numb.

Jackson stands, giving her a quick squeeze on the shoulder. “Clean up, take a water break, then you’re back on the rounds upstairs. You up for it?”

“I’ll be okay.” She’s not convinced, and surely Jackson isn’t either. But he doesn’t stop her. He’s about to return to the operating room when she says, “I can’t remember his first name. The little boy’s.”

A hesitant pause, then Jackson answer. “His name was Aaron.”

She nods. It only seems right to remember that name, the name of the first patient she killed.

They haven’t spoken in days, and it’s driving Bellamy crazy.

He hates how shitty it makes him feel. But it’s the truth. He’s gotten used to whispered conversations with her, briefly in the quieter halls of the clinic or in his kitchen. It feels bizarre now that they’ve stopped. It feels… empty.

It’s only worse that they left things on such an awkward note, with that kiss in the stairwell. A kiss that, obviously, meant nothing to Clarke. Perhaps worse than nothing, if it scared her away. Things were fine before that, they were good. Even after the night in the barn, waiting out the storm. He’d felt something stirring then, but it was easier to keep that buried away when he didn’t have that traitorous memory of her lips on his, her hands fisted in his hair as their bodies arched together.

He plunges the soaking mop onto the floor with a thick squelch, feeling drops of water spray his jumpsuit and boots. Maybe wet feet will be uncomfortable enough to distract him.

The hallway he’s mopping seems to grow as he works, the far wall never coming any closer. Hardly anyone comes down this wing, but it seems the powers that be just love to make his job as boring and grueling as possible. So he’s trapped down here, on a bottom level of the clinic, working in silence among his too-loud thoughts and a smelly mop.

He’s become used to the solitude, so when he hears footsteps, he jumps. They come from a stairwell off the further hallway to his left. Bellamy think he’s imagining things when Clarke comes marching down the stairs.

And stops dead when she sees him.

He stands to full height, a wide room separating them. The silence is thick and tense. Without a word or change in her face, Clarke turns and slips down the corridor at a quick pace.

Bellamy abandons the mop and charges after her.

“Clarke.”

She moves fast without looking back, only confirming his fears – she’s been ignoring him. He won’t stop.

“Clarke, please, talk to me. What’s wrong?”

She flexes her hands as she moves. It’s a nervous gesture.

“Did I do something?”
They round a corner and Bellamy sees Clarke’s target: a door to the back lot behind the clinic. A more discreet exit. He knows he’s almost out of time, and he hates saying it but he does it anyways, “You can’t just shut me out, Clarke. I know too much. I don’t want to report it, the things we’ve done, but I could.”

This finally forces her to stop. When she turns around, Bellamy reads tightness all across her face. An emotionless mask. It’s so unlike the Clarke he’s seen these last several weeks. “You’re right. You know too much. And if you know what’s good for you, you’ll stay away from me.”

There’s ice in her words that hits him hard. “Clarke--”

“Stay the hell away from me.” She starts to slip up, and he can see real pain in her face. “It’s better for everyone if you do.”

Her words hurt. His cruel memory drags up that kiss again, in such stark contrast to the closed-off Clarke in front of him. An ice queen rebuilding her walls.

His heart screams to move, to stop her, but he lets her walk away.

Finn isn’t expecting tapping at his bedroom window, but he’s even more surprised to see Clarke. He’s always had a soft spot for her, sure. A few years ago he’d seen his chance and tried outright flirting with her, making his intentions more clear that he probably should’ve. But Clarke, to her credit, shut him down, saying she didn’t want to hurt Raven. He’d bruised his ego, but eventually he understood. Raven still didn’t know about it.

So maybe he feels a tiny bit guilty opening the window and helping Clarke climb through. Because, of course, Raven isn’t here. She’s in jail.

Clarke is here, though.

He shuts the window and rubs his hands on his pants. “What are you doing here, Clarke?”

She scoffs, looking strange in his bedroom. Out of place. “I’d say it’s a little late to be asking that. But I need your help. And I think you need me too.”

Clarke folds her arms across her chest, and he really doesn’t need any attention drawn to her chest. It’s late, she shouldn’t be here. He clears his throat. “I… still don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’m talking about Raven.”

That pours some cold water onto his thoughts. “What do you mean?”

“I mean break her out. We both know she’s not going to get a fair trial, and it’s got to be hell in there.”

Finn can hardly believe the words coming out of her mouth. “Break her out? Clarke, I wouldn’t even know where to start! And if we did where would she go?”

Clarke shrugs, like this is a minor detail. “We hide her. There are plenty of places to hide someone in Arkadia. She hides for a bit while Wells and I work out a pardon bargain with Wells’s dad. Maybe I can get my mom to sway him.”

He shakes his head. “What you’re talking about, this is some crazy shit, Clarke. They’d turn around and arrest us if we get caught. This is straight up treason.”
Clarke’s hand lunges out and grabs his forearm in a vicelike grip. “Raven is sitting in a cell right now, Finn. They’re not going to let her walk, we both know that. Either they’ll figure out a way to make the rest of her life as miserable as possible, or they’ll end her. You can bet your ass she knows that’s her reality.” She gets in his face. “Raven loves you, Finn. With her whole heart. If your roles were reversed, I know she’d be looking for any way, any possible chance to get you out of prison.”

He bits on the inside of his lip, feeling the rising guilt from deep in his stomach. He knows Clarke is right. From the looks of things, she knows she’s right too. “So, what’s your plan?”

“Well, you work at the dam still, right?” He nods, and she continues. “I’m thinking we cut power to the prison by cutting all the power, or at least most of it. It’ll cripple Arkadia for a few precious minutes and allow us a fair shot.”

He starts to piece it together before she gives him the next detail.

“We need you to disable the turbines, or remove them from the waterflow or something. We need that dam down.”

Chapter End Notes

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

A huge thank you always to my readers, whether you’ve been following this story from the beginning, or if you’ve recently found it. You’ve likely noticed I’ve been super inconsistent with uploads, and allow me to explain why.

I started this fanfic right after season 3 ended, and that’s when I planned the entire piece. I made a full story outline, with summaries for each chapter for me to follow. The entire thing was planned years ago. In the two years since I did that, I’ve had a whole slew of personal events keeping me from consistently writing and publishing. I’ve graduated high school and started university. But beyond that, we’ve seen The 100 canon change dramatically, as it does from season to season.

When trying to pick back up with H&H, I realized I’d planned an entire story based around characters from season 3 canon. They’re extremely different now. I’d staked my story around relationships and dynamics that have shifted or disappeared entirely by season 5. I’ve always struggled to write fanfiction during a current season of The 100 – things change quickly and, as a fanfic writer, I feel I have some responsibility to follow some aspects of canon. I try hard to keep characters genuine and authentic, and I’ve always enjoyed that challenge. Lately, on season 5, it's been really tricky.

(This isn’t a critique of the last two seasons of The 100, I’ve enjoyed them immensely! I’m just having a hard time keeping up.)
I struggled returning to H&H, with a plot outline that felt outdated to me. And changing direction halfway through a dystopian mystery has proven nearly impossible. I considered abandoning this fic for good and trying something else.

But, honestly, it was YOUR reviews and follows and kudos that’s keeping me going. I feel so blessed every time I get a fanfiction notification, even the smallest gestures completely brighten my day. I feel I owe it to you to finish this story and do it justice.

I think this story is going to prove exciting and special, even with some “outdated canon” elements. I hope you stay with me. Because your support, as readers and reviewers, has meant the world to me. At the end of the day, I’m like you – a dedicated The 100 fan who loves the show, reading fanfiction, and occasionally creating some of my own. We’re in this crazy community together, and I felt I owed you all an explanation of why I’ve been struggling.

If you’re a fanfiction creator and have dealt with similar things, I’d love to hear your story. Moving beyond that, I’d love to hear what you think of this chapter – or of the piece as a whole. I’ll admit it: writing fanfiction is hard and it’s a job. But sharing my stories with people around the world has proven to be one of the most rewarding experiences I’ve had yet.

Thank you for your support.
-K.T.
Her cell is tiny, cold, and lonely.

Growing up, Raven was lucky to never see the inside of the incarceration center. She’d always assumed it was miserable and dull. But now, she sees she’s underestimated it. Her cell has walls of solid, smooth metal, making her feel even more isolated and enclosed than she already feels. Everything is unusually chilly for the early-autumn weather outside, like she is locked in an icebox. Sounds echo off the walls, even in silence. Everything beyond is the distant hum of electrically-mechanized locks and the occasional faraway, muffled cry.

Raven hugs one on knee to her chest, keeping her bad leg outstretched. In the burnished metal walls, she can make out the rough outline of her reflection. It’s all is fuzzy edges and unfocused features, but even her reflection looks small.

Raven feels small. Helpless. Completely at the mercy of the guards and the Council and whoever else decides her fate. It’s infuriating.

In the few days she’s been locked away, she’s had minimal contact with the outside world. Twice a day, a little flap at the bottom of her cell door opens and a meal tray is pushed through. Raven doesn’t touch it. She doesn’t trust the food, doesn’t trust that they haven’t slipped something into it to sedate her or keep her out of her right mind. She wants to stay alert and coherent. And she can’t do much in this cell, but it’s the one little act of rebellion she has left.

Her stomach hates her for it. It’s taken all the strength she’s got, but she doesn’t want to cave. She’s
on her fifth day at the incarceration center – judging by the meal trays, the only indication of time’s passing in this windowless cell. Even the lights stay on constantly, halfway lit and giving everything a sickly glow.

Overwhelming hunger and frustration aside, Raven is bored.

When she was first locked up, she lashed out. Kicking at the door, the walls, the bedframe, the toilet in the corner. Punches and kicks and throwing her whole weight against that locked door. Nothing made so much as a dent in the smooth metal.

Soon, her anger settled into fear. She didn’t know what would become of her: an unruly citizen arrested for speaking out in such a public, controversial way. She’d never seen someone do that. And if they did, then she’s certain they weren’t seen again.

She wants her friends. She wants Finn. She wants someone to tell her that she’ll be okay, because nothing is okay.

Her door slides open.

If she’d had more energy, if her blood sugar hadn’t dropped to dangerously low levels, she might’ve jumped up and tried to run for it. But even her food-deprived brain knew that was futile, seeing an armed guard fill the doorway and step through.

For a fleeting moment, Raven’s heart stops. This is it. This is the moment where they come to get rid of me.

But then she notices the meal tray in the guard’s hands.

The door shuts behind him and he stands there staring at her, steel in his dark eyes. “It’s been five days, and you haven’t eaten.”

No shit Sherlock. Her stomach is practically digesting itself, but she tries to match the confident, intimidating look he wears on his face. “So?”

“So, you’re given this food for a reason, and it’s in your best interest to eat it.”

“Fuck your food,” she spits at him, hating how small and hoarse her voice sounds from yelling, then not speaking for days. “I don’t know what’s laced in it, but I don’t want it.”

“You think we’re lacing your meals? With what?”

“You think we’re lacing your meals? With what?”

“Something to make me mild. Obedient. To keep me from fighting back.”

“Fighting back?” He kneels down, setting the tray on the ground. “You’re starving yourself. You’re not fighting back. You’re not dealing them any damage by hurting yourself. I’m well aware of what you did to get yourself locked up in here and let me tell you – they’re not sympathetic to your cause. So you trying to hurt yourself by refusing to eat? You’re only helping them.”

“So what?” She fights to stay strong with the food a meter away from her. “I can be nice and healthy when they march me out to the firing squad?”

“I don’t know what’s going to happen. But this isn’t fighting. This is giving up.”

Her stomach growls so loud she’s sure he can hear it. He must, because the corner of his mouth twitches up slightly and he pushes the tray closer to her with his knuckle. Raven’s restraint snaps and she lunges for a slice of bread.
She attacks it with ferocity, hating her desperation but *holy shit* it feels good to eat. The guard stands and leans against the wall, arms folded.

“I’m eating, okay?” Raven says plainly. “You can leave now.”

“I want to make sure you eat all of it, and I’ll need to collect the tray anyways.”

Raven stops mid bite. “Now I’m sure this is laced.”

He sighs in frustration. “It’s not. You need to eat it all because your body has been depleted of energy and nutrients and you need to refuel. But go slow. You’ll hurl.”

Raven swallows the rest of her bread in one big bite to spite him.

He gives her a look like she’s the last prisoner he wants to be assigned to. He can’t be much older than her, with a dark complexion and hair buzzed close to his head. He’s got his hands tucked under his arms, so she can’t see his identifying tattoo. She guesses Head.

“What do I call you?” she asks.

He stays frozen for a moment, before responding. “Shaw.”

“Why are you helping me, Shaw?”

“I’m not.”

“You wouldn’t let me starve.”

He shakes his head, “If that’s where the bar is set, then I guess anything passes as ‘help’.”

“They’re not going to let me walk, are they?”

His silence speaks volumes before he throws out an answer. “I don’t know. Maybe you’re right.”

“Surely you’ve seen people come here for all sorts of crimes. What’s your guess?”

“I don’t know,” he repeats. “I never seen someone do something like *this*.”

Raven doesn’t know how to respond.

He continues, “When they brought you in here, you would’ve thought you’d set off a bomb or something. No one knew what to make of you. I still don’t know what to make of the things you said.”

She only feels more defeated. “It was crazy, right?” She’s only half asking the question, but she’s surprised there’s no response. “Right?”

Raven looks up at Shaw, and for a second there’s something in his face that suggests maybe it wasn’t such a crazy thing to say, calling out the council and their system. It disappears the moment he catches her stare.

“Next time, just eat your meal without me having to fight you on it.”

Their plan is madness, and Wells has made sure to say that plenty of times. But, of course, he’s still onboard.
He knows better than anyone, really, how serious Raven’s crime was. He’s spent enough time around councilmembers to understand how they laser in on public dissent, how they work to keep things calm and peaceful in Arkadia. He’s heard it a hundred times – a small whisper of rebellion can send the whole community crashing into anarchy.

Now, he’s not sure about the plan to hide Raven if they’re able to break her out of the incarceration center. Arkadia is fairly large for a township, but it’s still under a decent amount of surveillance. Even so, he’s promised Finn, and his friends, that he’ll fight for Raven when the time comes. Even - and especially - if it means taking it up with his father.

Who isn’t a horrible man, he tries to remind himself as he sits on a bench down the street from the incarceration center, a book balanced on his knee. Plotting renegade schemes like this, it can be so easy to cast his father as the villain in their narrative, the villain they need to fight against. But Wells knows things aren’t so black and white. And at the end of the day, they might just need to beg this “villain” for a pardon to save Raven’s life.

He tries to keep his leg from bouncing nervously, but he’s doing a terrible job. He’s supposed to be sitting on the bench with calm, taking a break from an evening, pre-curfew walk to read a book under the lamplight. His friends all nominated him as the lookout, seeing this as a viable excuse for him to be out, since he’s gone for similar walks before. Also, and they didn’t say this outright but Wells could read the room, they weren’t confident he’d be the right choice for the actual rescue team.

Octavia, being smallest and quick on her feet, was chosen first for the rescue team. She volunteered for it with enthusiasm. Wells isn’t sure how he feels about it – he’s not sure how he feels about her to be honest – but he sets that aside for Raven’s sake. If Octavia is really as quick and gutsy as she’s made herself out to be, then maybe she’s Raven’s best chance.

Someone mentioned Octavia needing assistance, and that’s when she offered up Atom’s name. This had forced everyone to pause for a moment. “Why him?” Wells had asked.

Octavia had been all strategy at that moment. “For one thing, he and Raven were friends back in school, she knew him before I even did. He’s clever, he’s miles better at picking locks and breaking into places than I am. He’ll stay quiet if I ask him to.”

“But this is very risky, do you feel okay encouraging your boy toy to join us?” Finn had asked.

“Oh please, we’re not that exclusive. And besides, he… owes me one.” When further explanation was expected, Octavia continued, “He promised me a tattoo, and things got dicey fast. Left with a nasty injury, no tattoo. If he does this, I’ll call it even.”

By now, Wells is half-convinced Octavia is crazy.

But at the end of the day, she just needs to be fast. Their plan is basic enough: Finn, disguised and poised at the dam facility, and Clarke will override controls at the dam long enough to forcibly stall the southern turbines, shutting down the generators. The ripple effect should be enough to cause several minutes of a power outage across half of Arkadia, including the incarceration center. By the time emergency generators are active, they need to have Raven out.

Wells feels horrible emotions swirling and stewing inside him, guilt and fear and a whole lot of nerves. He’s hoping the power outage will cause minimal collateral damage, and it was convenient that the clinic isn’t on the wrong side of the outage.

The clinic. Clarke had made an important stop there today for one of the key pieces to their plan – a gas concentrate typically administered in small does to induce sleep. Without fear or hesitation,
Clarke swiped five containers of the gas. It was Atom’s idea to repurpose some empty, devised “stink bomb” grenade casings from old fun with Murphy and Mbege. Now, they were knockout bombs for storming the dam facility and the incarceration center. The kind of crazy idea that would make Raven proud.

Wells looks down at his watch, each click of the second hand bringing him closer to their moment. Closer to chaos.

Closer to treason.

It’s not dark enough for this yet, but they’re working on a limited timeframe.

Clarke’s feet fly as fast as she can without breaking into a jog. She’s got her jacket on and hood up, and she carries a heavy backpack. The weight tugging on her shoulders seems to keep her grounded, keep her body from shaking.

She tries to focus on putting one foot in front of the other as she hurries down the street. She tries to keep her mind off that note she left on the kitchen counter, with a simple “Mom” written on the back. Her mother will be working another late shift tonight, and Clarke is counting on that. The note won’t get touched until the early morning.

She tries to forget that perfectly ordinary envelope she dropped into the clinic memo box at the end of her shift, knowing it wouldn’t be delivered until tomorrow. She’d even adjusted her handwriting on the cover so no one would recognize she’d sent that note to Bellamy Blake.

Every footstep competes with her racing heartbeat, and the two together feel like war drums pounding in Clarke’s head. She takes over her mental inventory, cataloguing the rations, the canteens, the stockpiled supplies, the hand-drawn map. At the bottom of her backpack, wrapped in plastic like before, sits Becca’s journal. She can only hope it’ll reveal more answers beyond Arkadia than it did within.

And at the bottom of her stomach, there’s guilt. Guilt for using Raven’s arrest – and the plan of breaking her out – as cover for her own escape. Clarke knows that, objectively, it’s wrong. But a large power outage is the perfect distraction, especially if Clarke’s theory holds: that there’s an escape point at the dam.

To avoid being seen, Clarke takes a shaded route towards the dam, travelling behind warehouses and through narrow passages. She realizes she’s not far from Bellamy’s neighborhood, as she rounds a corner. Again, she tries to block that note from her mind.

Clarke slips down an alleyway, used to the silence interrupted only by her own quick feet. So she’s startled when she hears a shoe scuff on the pavement and, worse, when a man turns around to face her head on.

Shit.

Her hood isn’t hiding anything from this angle. The man – tall, with a wrinkled brow and a stubble across his jaw – must’ve been sitting along the back of the warehouse wall. Clarke is penned in; her only options are turn around and go back, or try to keep going.

But the man isn’t just looking at her, he’s really looking. He sees something in her face that holds his attention. “I know you,” he says in a low growl.

“I think you’re confusing me with someone else.”
He keeps squinting. “You… you’re one of those doctors. At the clinic.”

Clarke can’t move. She knows him from somewhere. “Umm, I’m sorry ---”

“Yeah, you were on the operating team. You’re Abby Griffin’s daughter.”

Finally, she places him. A memory comes rushing back at her, of a father and his young son sitting in a hospital room for a pre-op meeting. She was there, and Jackson, and the rest of the operating team. The boy sitting on the table, his father hovering next to him, couldn’t have been more than six or seven. His eyes sparkled with light.

“Your son…’ the words fell from Clarke’s lips before she could catch herself.

He sees her realization. The father looks different now, with circles under his eyes and a tightness in his jaw. Clarke recalls some of the brief details given to her about the boy and his father. This man is a guard, and his last name is Emerson.

Guilt rushes at her, overwhelming and sickening and joining with that sitting in her stomach already. “Your son’s name is Aaron.”

“It was.” The man’s voice breaks, and Clarke’s heart with it. She wonders how much he knows about what happened on that operating table.

“I’m so sorry.”

“They told me he died from the procedure, that it was part of the risk.” Clarke notices a metal flask in his hand. “But going into the operation, your team said he’d be safe. That any risks were small.”

Clarke wants to lie, to tell him some excuse. But her throat feels like it’s tightening up. The image of that young boy’s face flashes again behind her eyes, an image of him wide-eyed and awake.

Then her last glimpse of him on the table.

*It’s my fault.*

“My son is dead.” Emerson’s words are starting to slur more noticeably.

“I’m sorry,” Clarke is shaking now. Again, she sees the boy. “I never – I never meant to hurt him, I never meant –”

Emerson catches her trembling words. “You know something. You know the truth.”

“I—I…”

*I’m the one to blame.*

He comes at her in three large steps, but Clarke can’t get her body to move.

*I cracked. I killed a child.*

Emerson is in her face, his hot breath smelling of booze.

“What do you know?”

“I – I don’t know anything.”
“You’re lying.” Clarke’s doing a poor job of it, as Emerson snarls in her face. “Tell me the truth.”

“Leave me alone!” She pushes him back with her palms, but he’s fast on his feet. He flies at her, drunk with alcohol and grief and rage, and slams her backwards against the wall. Her head hits the concrete and for a moment, she sees stars. Then she kicks Emerson hard in the knee, sending him peeling back and howling in pain. Clarke scrambles away, her backpack dragging on her shoulders. She feels his strong hand grip her arm, tugging her up, and she claws at his fingers with her own nails. There’s a hiss and she’s got blood on her fingers.

Run. Run! Every instinct screams at Clarke to leave as fast as she can. But Emerson swears in a slurred tongue behind her, and she watches him reach under his jacket into the waistband of his pants. Time slows, stops.

He’s pointing a gun at her.

For half a second, Clarke braces for the blast, for the cracking sound and sudden darkness. But then, a figure hurtles into Emerson in a blur of shape and shadow.

The two go sprawling onto the street in a tangle. The sun is lower now, keeping the alley shrouded in dark, but Clarke recognizes a familiar silhouette in that mess of curly hair.

Bellamy.

“No!” She cries, lunging to pull him off Emerson as the two men roll. From somewhere between them, the gun skitters out and lands a few feet away. Emerson dives for it and Bellamy follows, crashing onto him. It’s a mess of limbs and fists and clawing hands. Clarke can barely tell them apart in the shadow.

All of a sudden it’s Emerson on top, his forearm pinning Bellamy down under the chin, digging into his neck. Bellamy’s face is flushing red and he gasps for any air. Clarke rushes for Emerson, grabbing for his shoulders, to pull him back, to do anything...

The gun goes off.

It’s louder, so much louder than Clarke could’ve imagined in that tiny alleyway. It echoes off the walls and rattles her teeth. Everything freezes. Bellamy’s eyes are blown wide with fear. She can’t breathe.

Then Emerson topples to the side, blood pouring from a wound in the middle of his chest.

Bellamy stands, the gun in his hand, his eyes still wide. Clarke doesn’t move, but someone else does. Down at the end of the alley, a figure starts into a run. Someone saw.

Bellamy drops the gun.

Run now.

“How did you find me?” Clarke pants, breathless.

“I recognized your jacket and followed you.” His voice sounds haunted.

There’s no time for questions and awkwardness. “We need to go,” she says in a hushed whisper. He doesn’t move. She reaches for his arm, “Bellamy, someone saw us. They saw you with the gun.”

He flinches at her touch but still doesn’t move. A muscle twitches in his tight jaw. Then, finally, he
speaks. “I killed him.”

“You were defending me, and defending yourself. He was on top of you. You didn’t have a choice.”

“Clarke,” his eyes won’t leave Emerson’s bleeding corpse. Clarke follows his gaze down to Emerson’s hand.

To the Head tattoo below his thumb.

Bellamy’s whisper is dry and raspy. “I killed a Head.”

“It was self-defense.” But even to Clarke, the excuse sounds thin and weak in her ears. This is it for Bellamy. He’ll be executed for a crime like this, self-defense or not. A wild panic rises in her chest before she remembers her backpack, her jacket, her boots.

“Come with me.”

Bellamy turns to look at her, eyes so empty. There’s a distant sound from down the street and Clarke drags him further into the shadows, until they’re both pressed up in an alcove along the wall.

“Bellamy, I’m getting out. I’m going to try to escape at the dam, like John Murphy.”

“Murphy drowned.”

“I know you don’t believe that.” She won’t take her stare off him. Reaching up, she holds his face in her hands. “If you stay here, they’ll execute you. Alie Pramheda isn’t screwing around, she’s willing to kill you and this gives her the perfect reason to. I won’t let that happen. Come with me, and at least have a chance at surviving, at making it outside the wall.”

“But my sister…”

Clarke’s heart aches, longing to tell Bellamy the truth about where Octavia is right now and how she’s equally embroiled in Clarke’s plan. But none of Clarke’s friends know the truth about tonight – about the distraction they’re creating to help Clarke, not Raven. Instead, she says, “She won’t know anything, and that’ll protect her. She’ll be innocent.”

“I can’t leave her.”

“Is it better to stay and force her to watch you die?” Clarke’s voice trembles on that last word. They’re losing time.

Run!

“And if it doesn’t work?” His words are small. “If we can’t get out?”

“Then goodness knows we’re both dead anyways.” She pulls his head closer to hers, their breaths mingling. “Come with me. You and me. Let’s just go.”

She feels him nod rather than sees it. But it’s enough. She peels away, stepping back from the wall as her hand finds his for a quick squeeze. Then she’s dragging him down the alley and they break into a run.

Finn stands outside the halfway-open door, listening to the hiss as the knockout “grenades” expel their gas. He hears muffled shouts as the workers inside – only two on this lighter evening shift – realize where the sound is coming from. Then, bodies slump forward onto the control desk.
Clarke and Atom came through.

Finn counts to sixty, waiting the full amount Clarke warned him to, otherwise he’d risk being affected by the gas himself. He knows the control room, knows the low ceilings and three overhead vents that would pull any of the leftover gas out of the room. The guards would still be knocked out for at least thirty minutes, which should give him plenty of time to disable the turbines. Provided Clarke makes it to her position.

He wishes they had some way to communicate during this mission, some radio comms or something. But the only ones in Arkadia with that kind of tech are professional guards, and there aren’t any black-market knockoffs. Instead, they’d have to rely on blind trust and timing.

He takes a gulping inhale of hallway air, just in case, and enters the control room.

Moving swiftly, Finn keeps his head down and chin tucked into his chest. He wears a brimmed hat and a swath of fabric across his nose and mouth. He spots his first target high on the wall to his right. Without pausing, Finn drags an empty chair over to the corner of the room, climbs onto it with his head still down, and reaches into his pocket. He grabs a wad of putty – swiped from Raven’s dizzying toolbox of odd scraps, tools, and pieces of junk – and smacks it square onto the lens face of the first surveillance camera. Thank goodness for low ceilings.

He repeats this on the other side of the room, covering the second camera before checking that the door to the control room is still locked. Good. They specifically timed this so that half of the dam facility would be changing shifts, including the surveillance team. By the time the new team got situated, hopefully Finn would be close to shutting down the power.

Invisible, Finn takes an unoccupied chair at the control table. Using his foot, he pushes another chair back, moving a slumped worker out of the way. Finn scans the panels, reading quickly. He doesn’t know the details, but he remembers that there are only two times the turbines are raised from the water: for maintenance, and to avoid large, damaging debris that somehow got into the workflow. Maintenance only happens once a year, and dam officials coordinate with workers at the backup generators to reserve enough energy to power Arkadia during the work. Finn guesses that, since maintenance takes more coordination, it probably takes additional clearance codes.

But if debris were to get into the water, there needs to be a method to quickly pull up the turbines on short notice. So he searches the buttons and screens for some override mechanism.

There. At the bottom of the console, there’s a small switch marked for manual override. Heart pounding in his ears, Finn presses it. A message appears on the center screen.

Awaiting override confirmation from turbine deck

He takes a beat to process the message. It’s referring to the platforms hanging above the turbines and workflow. He’s been there only a few times before, but Clarke volunteered to go to the turbine bay to make sure they were successfully extracted from the water. That was her assignment. Now, Finn is especially grateful they agreed to send her there.

He checks the worn watch on his wrist, noting the time. Clarke should be here by now.

Bellamy watches Clarke roll up her sleeve, revealing the last string of letters and numbers written on her skin in pen ink. She keys them into the door panel, while he stands behind her, scanning the hallway for any workers. The dam control facility – a stark, unimpressive labyrinth of corridors and code-activated doors – is cold and full of echoes. It’ll be better once they’re on the other side of the
door.

This one has a large sign hanging over it:

**CAUTION**

**TURBINE DECK ACCESS**

**AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY**

They sure as hell aren’t “authorized”, but this is all part of Clarke’s plan. On the way to the dam, as they slipped through shadows and across back alleys, she’d explained what was happening tonight: the plan to break Raven out by cutting the power. It is ruthlessly brilliant, he has to admit. Even if the rescue mission fails, any loss of power would provide Clarke with enough of a distraction for her own escape.

That is, if they found whatever door Murphy might’ve slipped through.

With the last digit, the door unlocks. Thankfully, the codes Finn gave to Clarke are all still valid. She’s told him Finn and Wells Jaha are involved, and a few other friends of Raven’s who he wouldn’t recognize. He hopes they’re trustworthy.

Clarke reaches for the manual latch to open the door, then stops. Shrugging off her bag, she digs past her last knockout grenade – Bellamy’s seen the frightening but impressive effects of two already – and tosses him a wad of putty.

“Keep your head down when we enter. Look for the security cameras as quickly as possible, then climb up and cover their lenses with this. Finn said the deck is covered in steel scaffolding so climbing shouldn’t be a problem.”

He nods, in no place to disagree with any of her plan right now. Not when there’s likely already a price on his head for Emerson’s death. An accident – he couldn’t even tell where the barrel was facing when he went scrambling for the trigger. An accident no one would believe.

Clarke opens the door, and a wall of sound slaps him in the face. It’s the deafening sound of running water, churning paddles, and a buzz so tinny and low and that his teeth rattle. They hurry onto the first metal platform. Overhead and thirty feet away, he sees the enormous cylindrical base of what must be a generator. Damp, cold air blows off the dark water below, clinging to his hair and face in tiny droplets.

After getting over the initial shock of the chill and sound, Bellamy finds a camera mounted over the door they just entered through. He scales the platform’s scaffolding, desperately clinging to the slick pipes, and covers the lens. He hops back down, his boots making a clanging sound on the grate-panel floor.

Clarke’s positioned herself over at a small control panel, its screen dim and buttons fading in color from the constant moisture in the air. Even with the Emerson interaction earlier, they’ve still managed to hit that window of time Clarke was aiming for: when the turbines would be monitored just by the control room and not with a live worker.

The screen is a hazy mess of confusing inquiries and options in boxes. Clarke’s hands hover over the console, not sure where to start. Bellamy recognizes a few engineering terms from a lifetime ago back in school, but he doesn’t have the slightest clue what to do with it.

Suddenly, the screen flares with a bold message and he’s thinking they’re caught. But… no, it’s not
that. It’s a transmission.

Emergency override request from control center. Accept?

“It’s Finn,” Clarke says breathlessly, a moment ago as equally panicked as he was. She presses a button for yes.

Confirm override.

There’s a small icon of a lever on the screen, and it takes them half a second to find it on the console. Clarke’s hand clasps around it, then she turns to look back at him. There’s a flicker of hesitation in her eyes.

They don’t have time to hesitate. He wants to tell her this, wants to remind her of the ominous signs throughout Arkadia, of Becca’s journal and the hints of some Kane rebellion. Of Emerson’s body lying in that alleyway next to the gun with Bellamy’s prints all over it.

All he can do is meet her eyes and give a reassuring nod.

Clarke pulls the lever and their world groans.

The sound starts far below them and rumbles upwards, and Bellamy can feel the platform tremble. A droning siren rings out, halfway obscured by the onslaught of machinery noise as the enormous turbines jolt and then, slowly, start to rise out of the water. There’s three of them visible in the shadowy cavern, and they emerge from the dark water like beasts from some horror story. Clarke and Bellamy reach the railing at the edge of the platform to get a better look. The blades are monstrous and slick with grime. The air reeks of old water and rust and oil.

There’s another warning sound now, higher pitched and coming from the console’s screen. It’s flickering red, warning that there’s not enough accessible power stored in the generators to prevent a blackout. Perfect.

Something else catches Bellamy’s eye, lit partially by the red light. A crack in the far wall, but an even crack… a doorframe.

“Clarke,” he tugs on her shoulder. “A door.”

The door. The door Murphy must’ve slipped through, if their theory was correct. They cross to the door in fast strides and Clarke reaches for it.

“It’s locked.” In the dim wavering light, he can make out a small panel just above the door handle made of newer, brighter metal than the rest of old door.

“They’ve added a new lock.”

“Shit!” Clarke stoops to get a better look. “I’ve never seen a manual lock like this. It’s not designed for a normal key. The hole is this bizarre shape.”

Bellamy’s about to lower himself down too when there’s a piercing siren ring, then silence. The dim lights overhead go dark. The machinery grinds to a shuddering halt. The cavern is silent, save for that endless rushing of water.

There are faint luminescent strips, charged by the little light they received, lining the handrails and steps of the scaffolding. It’s not at all enough to see by. Bellamy blinks rapidly, rushing his eyes to adjust.
“So at least the power is out now,” he says.

“We have no way of knowing if it actually caused a blackout in Arkadia.”

Bellamy can’t let Clarke waver. “We can’t turn back now.”

“Well there’s no way we can get this door open, unless you’re hiding some blowtorch you haven’t told me about.”

His eyes are finally adjusting, and dark shadowy figures materialize in his vision. There’s Clarke in front of him, in front of the door. He can make out the outlines of the turbines lifted high over the water, like wings as wide as a car. The handrails are a bit easier to see, with their luminescent strips, and they extend deeper into the cavern’s gloom.

“Maybe there’s another way. But we need more light.”

Clarke swings her heavy backpack off her shoulder, thwacking him in the elbow, and pulls something out of a deep pocket. It’s a small metal flashlight, powered by a little hand crank to charge it. The light it produces is shallow and greenish, but it’s light.

He’s got to hand it to Clarke – she thinks of everything.

“Lead the way,” she says.

And they’re up and crossing along the catwalk, the metal slippery underfoot. Clarke lights as Bellamy leads as quickly as they can safely move. The darkness takes shape into more catwalks and turbines before their path reaches a fork.

They turn right and barely make it twenty paces before reaching a dead end, in the form of a rough concrete wall. Doubling back, they turn right and reach another wall, similarly concrete but with rusted metal panels along the floor.

Nothing, again.

Bellamy’s panicking heart starts to rise into his throat before he hears Clarke. “Wait! There’s something on this panel.”

He bends beside her. The metal looks very old and weathered, but once Clarke smears away a layer of grime, letters form.

EXTERIOR MAINTENANCE

“Exterior,” he breathes, letting hope creep into his voice. He points at the four screws keeping the panel into the wall but Clarke’s already digging for some tool. She extracts a metal spoon, thin but strong.

He almost laughs, but it just might work.

Clarke jams the end of the handle into the first screw’s head and twists. He clasps his hands over hers, adding to the leverage and audibly sighing with relief when the screw starts to turn. In two minutes, they’ve got the panel open.

There’s a rush of stale air and dust coming from that small patch of dark, barely tall enough for him to crawl through on his knees. For a moment, dread fills his stomach. This shaft looks old – what if it’s been covered up on the other end? What if it’s another dead end?
Clarke’s hand finds his, and her fingers are clammy with nervous sweat and trembling. “Together.” It’s not a question, but he’s pretty sure Clarke needs him here just as much as he needs her.

He nods. “I’ll take the light and go first.”

It’s just as hellish instead as he was expecting: cramped, dusty, and endless. There’s the overpowering sound of water on all sides of him, and he has no idea where he’s going as he crawls, taking each bend and turn in the tunnel. His pulse pounds in his ears, the only sound competing with the water. He wants to turn back and look at Clarke, just to see her there and calm himself down, but he can’t do that without smacking his head. Still, there’s the feeling of her presence just behind him. It’s nearly enough.

Then, light. At first he’s sure he must be imagining it. But there is a bluish, growing glow in the space up ahead. He turns another corner and can smell fresh air.

“Is that…?” Clarke gasps.

“I think so.”

He sees a grate at the end of this tunnel, and faint light trickles through the holes. Bellamy reaches it first and can make out the night sky on the other side. Using the side of his fist, he slams into the grate once… twice…

He shifts to his elbow, jabs it hard, and the grate pops open.

There is fresh air and the smell of nighttime and that constant rumble of water, only now it’s more distant. Shifting around in his crawling stance, Bellamy swings his legs out first and catches a ledge a few feet below the hole. Then he gets his bearings.

They’re over the side of the dam, at least a hundred feet above the water. It looks like there used to be some platform here, but now it’s reduced to a small concrete ledge only two feet wide and running along the tall stone wall. The forest spread out beyond the reservoir, a lush expanse of trees reaching to the far hills beyond.

Seeing no other option, Bellamy climbs out onto the ledge and begins searching for some handhold. He shifts and Clarke squeezes out behind him, taking in the surroundings.

They’re on the other side of the wall.

The rush of adrenaline courses through Bellamy’s veins for a flickering moment. Then he sees a looming shape silhouetted against the nighttime sky: a watchtower. Turning around, he sees another on the far end of the dam. They’re not fully lit—likely from the blackout—but there are specs of light that he assumes are backup lanterns.

Then, there’s shouting, and it’s aimed at them.

“Go!” Clarke yells, grabbing his arm and pulling him behind her. They keep their backs flush against the wall and try shimmying quickly along the ledge, hurrying to one side. It’s too slow. Fearless or crazy, Clarke breaks into a run, forcing Bellamy to race behind her. He realizes she’s trying to reach the end of the dam, searching for some ladder or stairwell or anything.

There’s a strange sound, a whizzing that slices past him and erupts into the stone of the dam. A bullet.

“They’re shooting!” He bellows and they move faster. But the guards are shooting from both ends,
and perhaps it’s only the darkness that keeps them from hitting their small targets on the dam wall.

Clarke stops, and Bellamy realizes what she’s about to say before the words leave her mouth. “We need to jump.”

“Are you insane?”

She points. “The edge of the reservoir is there. If we can swim for it, we can run for it.”

He looks down at where the water meets the dam, at the waves churning at mouth of the intake. They’ll have to outswim that current. “Can you swim?”

She nods, weakly.

They’re running out of time.

Another bullet whizzes by, striking the wall next to Clarke’s head and she cries out. It’s enough for Bellamy. It’s either drown in the reservoir or get shot right off the wall. Or that tiny, crazy chance they make it to the shore.

But it’s all they’ve got.

“Together,” he says to her when their eyes meet.

He jumps.

Chapter End Notes

Things are happening! Exciting!
I hope you enjoyed this update, and maybe for some of you (if you’re like me, and caught up on The 100 s5) it was a pleasant distraction from the events in 5x09. *cries*
Let me know what you think/how you're feeling about this chapter, and I'll try to get the next one up as soon as I can!
Do or Die

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Stars are only visible in darkness

Fear is ever-changing and evolving

And I, I can poison the skies

And I, I feel so alive

Nobody can save you now, king is crown, it’s do or die

Nobody can save you now, the only sound it’s the battle cry

-Imagine Dragons, “Battle Cry”

Standing in a little alleyway at the side of the incarceration center, Octavia hears the power outage before she sees it. The massive ice-gray boxes further down the alley – they must be the air conditioners – ceases their endless whirring and fall silent in an abrupt pop. There’s a whisper of a sizzling sound too, like a live wire falling dead.

In case of a power failure, Octavia imagines that the doors would all be secured with manual locks, especially the exterior ones. That’s why she’s not targeting a door. Instead, she stands below a bank of windows, with reflective glass panes about six feet off the ground. At her back, Atom waits. Once they’ve counted to five – enough time to ensure the power will stay off for the time being – he taps on her shoulder and she’s ready. In her hand, she holds a crowbar, stolen that night in the classification center after the tattoo fiasco.

Atom bends and Octavia, nimble as a cat, hops onto his back as he boosts her up to the window. Balancing, she jams the edge of the crowbar under the window and tugs on it with all the weight she can muster. After seconds that last for an eternity, the window gives, and Octavia uses the rest of the bar to smack the panes clean off the frame. They shatter inside on the floor.

The window is large enough for Octavia to crawl through with Atom’s boost. She lands quietly in the small pile of shards. Just along the edge of the frame, she notices two little black boxes: motion scanners, not unlike ones she’s seen at the windows of other important buildings. Their usually-red LED’s are dark, deactivated by the power outage.

After her, Atom swiftly hops up and pulls himself through the window. His shoulders barely fit. Octavia scans the room, seeing they’re in some smaller storage space. No cameras, though they should all be useless now anyways. To be safe, Octavia and Atom have covered their faces with bandanas and miscellaneous face guards from Raven’s scavenged stash. Atom wears an odd set of metalworking goggles and Octavia has an improvised welding mask.

“Move fast,” Octavia calls back to Atom from under the plate of metal. They rush to the door and, together, slide it open. Without power, it’s become heavier than it should be. On the other side, the hallway looks clear and very dark without the fluorescent lights. They run.

And they hardly make it around the corner when they find guards. Following their plan, Atom
reaches into the backpack he carries and slips out a knockout grenade. A guard pulls out his gun. Atom launches the uncapped grenade with an athletic arm before he and Octavia run back around the corner. Bullets strike the wall behind them, but they quickly stop. There’s several thuds as the guards collapse.

“Wait,” Atom advises as they mentally count to sixty. Octavia is grateful to have the grenades, but they lose precious time waiting for the gas to dissipate before they can reenter the space.

“This is taking too long,” she grumbles.

“You know why we have to wait.”

“We need to be searching. If we knew what cell she was in, this would be a lot easier.”

“Luckily it’s not that big of a building.” Atom’s eyes flick down to the watch on his wrist, still counting. “If we split up, we’ll cover more ground.”

She wheels on him. “Split up? That’s risky.”

“This whole thing is risky, but one of us should be able to find her sooner. Look,” he points at the watch. “We split up, search on our own, then get out and find Wells in five minutes.”

She glances at her own clock face, on an old forgotten watch Wells swiped from his father. “Five minutes.”

Atom squeezes her shoulder, something fierce burning in his eyes. He runs for the left and she goes right.

Her eyes have adjusted to the hallway gloom and she moves on light feet. Stuffed into her hoodie pocket, another knockout grenade bounces against her stomach. Adrenaline courses through her body like she’s sucked the electricity right out of this complex. She reaches a stairwell and starts climbing.

She comes out on the first bank of cells, a processed card outside each door naming the prisoner inside. Most are empty, though Octavia does recognize the names of a few familiar miscreants. Petty thieves and drunks, mostly. No Raven.

On the next floor, she finds a host of guards moving in the opposite direction. She’s silent as night, but one happens to glance over his shoulder and spot her lurking in the dim light. That’s when she uncaps the grenade and darts back into the staircase, counting to sixty.

Time leaks away.

Once the gas thins, Octavia returns to the hallways and scans this one just as swiftly as before. Still no sign of Raven’s name. It dawns on her that perhaps, since she’s a more serious offender, she’s locked away someone more secure. Or they’ve got her in an unlabeled cell. With no windows on the doors or walls, and with surveillance cell cameras down, there’s no way to see if an unmarked cell is actually empty or not. Dread fills Octavia’s stomach, but she pushes it down and returns to climb another flight of stairs.

This hallway is unimpressive, save for the different style of doors. The frames are thicker and the metal looks shinier. There’s also fewer of them. Octavia doesn’t want to be hopeful, as she searches for the cards but… there!

Reyes, #15_761
Octavia’s knees nearly sink with relief. She crashes into the door, jamming the crowbar into the frame and tugging. And tugging. She searches for any manual lock, ready to try her hand at picking it, but there’s no visible keyhole. Only a smooth small box where a keyhole might be.

She tries popping it off with the crowbar, but she can’t get a grip on it. Somehow, an electronic voice plays. “Additional unlocking authorization required.”

*What the hell?* The power is still down in this hallway, the lights and cameras all out. *Does this lock run on a separate battery?* Electronic batteries are rare and far between in Arkadia. But it makes sense, locking Raven in a higher-security cell.

Pulling the crowbar back, she swings hard at the box. The bar doesn’t make so much as a dent, and that same taunting voice says, “Additional unlocking authorization required.”

“Shut up!” Octavia growls in frustration, clawing at the little box with her nails, trying to feel for any edge to target. She shifts her hands, sliding her fingers down with her skin pressed against that smooth metal…

“Administrative authorization granted.”

The lock pops.

Octavia gasps, stunned. Looking down at her hands, she stares at her fingers, her wrists… *the watch.* Thelonious Jaha’s old watch, the one Wells swiped from the bottom of a drawer. One he guessed his father wouldn’t miss. There must be some master chip in it, granting him unlimited access as Chancellor.

Octavia can’t believe her luck, then she remembers the door. Just as heavy as the one from the storage room, it slides along slowly as just pulls hard on it.

And she sees the wilted form of Raven, hugging her knees, inside the dark cell.

For a moment, the world holds its breath as Clarke falls.

Her arms wheel out around her, as if she could do something to control her descent. All her senses narrow and tighten to the rush of wind at her face, the rising of her stomach into her throat, and the rapidly-approaching dark water below. She can’t hear, she can’t swallow.

Her only thought reminds her to close her eyes as she hits the water hard.

Every sense comes back, burning as the water overwhelms her. She spears down deep in the reservoir, feeling pressure and the tug of a strong current. Clarke forces her eyes open, stinging underwater, but there’s more darkness all around her. Disoriented, she loses too much air. It escapes her in a burst of bubbles, her lungs searing and aching. Her heartbeat roars in her head. Then her instincts kick in, those survivor instincts, and she starts paddling upwards.

The surface is so far away, a ripple of liquid obsidian with the tease of light flickering off it. She’ll never reach it…

Clarke erupts from the water and gasps. There’s water in her eyes and nose and mouth, and she and her pack are completely soaked. She treads water, kicking hard against that dragging current, and spins frantically looking for Bellamy. It’s too dark, there’s too little light.

Then he bursts from the water, his inky curls flat against his forehead. Their eyes meet for a fraction
of a second, and Clarke lets herself believe they’ll be okay.

Before the distant shouting and that horrible *pop* of gunshots.

“Swim!” Bellamy bellows. She can make out the edge of the reservoir about thirty yards away and pours all her energy into racing towards it. With dark wet clothes, she can imagine that she and Bellamy are tricky targets to spot against the water, but she’s not risking any time.

There’s a splash from somewhere behind her, and she realizes the guards are getting closer with their bullets.

**Twenty yards.**

Clarke’s swimming stroke isn’t at all graceful, but at least she’s moving. There’s water splashing in her face and eyes repeatedly, and she does her best to shake it away.

**Fifteen.**

Some part of her knows that this water is cold, and the night will be even colder in wet clothes. But her heart races at a dangerous speed, and she’s warm so long as she’s moving. She just has to keep moving.

**Ten.**

More bullets spray into the water around them. Clarke recoils and she hears Bellamy give a shout. He stays within arms-reach of her, even though he’s clearly a faster swimmer. If he’s slowing down to stay close to her, instead of getting to the shore as quickly as possible… Clarke makes a note to scream at him if they both make it out of here alive.

**Five yards.**

Burning. Everything is burning. Her lungs, the muscles in her arms and back, her eyes. Everything narrows onto that shoreline and the forest beyond it. She feels like her arms are going to pop off and ooze away. But soon, the water becomes shallow. There are rocks underfoot. Clarke lands her feet onto the edge of the shore as Bellamy does, and they start running.

The shouts are clearer now, as they’re closer to a lookout tower. The gunshots stop but Clarke’s sure it’s only a momentary break. Her legs are wobbly, going from swimming to running so quickly, but she can’t let it slow them down. She follows Bellamy, the water in her boots making squelching noises as she runs. There’s little light to go by, but they do their best to avoid the thick tree trunks. Smaller branches and bushes tear at her, stinging her face.

This is something out of a nightmare.

A strange noise roars from behind them, something mechanical and out of place here in the forest at night. Something with an *engine.*

Bellamy turns around to look for it but Clarke calls out, “Don’t stop! We need to keep moving.” She weaves left through a thicket of dense bushes and he comes crashing behind.

Then an even worse sound. A low whirring, rhythmic and repeating. *Thud thud thud thud.* A sound rarely – if ever – heard in Arkadia, one Clarke can only place from reading about it in an old history textbook.

A helicopter.
No! The aircraft sounds are far enough behind them that Clarke knows they’re not overhead yet, but it can move so much faster than they can. She steals a glance upwards and doesn’t notice the ground fall out beneath her frantic feet.

Clarke yelps, losing her balance and tumbling shoulder over shoulder down a slope. She’s smothered in bushes and leaves and can’t tell up from down until she finally slams to a halt, her torso aching horribly. She hears Bellamy land beside her, and he’s slower to rise than she is.

They’re at the bottom of some forest ravine, carved out by some long-gone river or something. Massive trees tower on all sides, their trunks as wide as a double doorway. Clarke whirls around, looking for an escape, until the approach of that engine sound has them both bolting towards the nearest tree.

Bellamy presses himself deep into a tall fern at the tree’s base, only to slip back and stumble. “Clarke,” he whispers and points, “there’s a hollow.”

At the bottom of the tree, where its ancient roots twist and rise out of the ground, part of the tree has rotted away leaving a small hollow in the dirt. It’s dark and small, but the ferns cover the entrance and it’s as good a hiding place as they can find.

Clarke squeezes in behind Bellamy just as the engines reach the edge of the ravine. She hears the rumbling from high above, and peering between the long fern leaves she can see several lights breaking over the bushes far away. They almost look like… like bikes, but with too many wheels. Lit from below, she can make out the dark-clothed forms of the riders, heads covered in helmets. Slowly, Clarke sinks back, deeper into the hollow. Her back presses flat against Bellamy’s chest, and she can feel his shaking breaths like her own.

She waits for it, the shouts of confirmation as they’re found out, sealing their fate. But they never come. Instead, the engines whir back up again and disappear back out of site, riding deeper into the forest. They both wait, unwilling to believe they’re clear yet. They wait as the thudding of the helicopter booms overhead, a low beating sound that aches like a drum in Clarke’s ears.

Then, it fades. Growing softer and softer, until they’re left in the forest’s silence. A breeze rustles through the branches, some distant bird coos, there are bugs buzzing and the sound of faraway paws stepping on old leaves. And yet, somehow, stillness.

Finally Clarke leans forward off Bellamy. His features reflect her own – fear slowly ebbing in exchange for hesitation and relief. In this dark hollow, she can only catch faint outlines of his face, but her eyes are adjusting.

Clarke exhaled. “Did we just…?”

“Make it outside the wall?” There’s hope in his quiet voice, plain and unashamed. She can’t see much of his smile, but she can hear it. “Yeah princess, we did.”

A quick laugh slips out from her chest, and she covers it with her mouth. Slowly, his grin materializes in the dark. They’re outside the wall. She wants to pinch herself, or climb the tallest tree and scream it to the world in triumph. Somehow, they’re still alive.

Then she hears the cawing of a crow and plummets back to reality. The night’s cold air, previously kept at bay by the running and the adrenaline, seeps into her soaked clothes. The hollow is small, only tall enough for them to sit and barely wide enough for a person to lay down.

Doing her best not to hit her head, Clarke shrugs off her heavy backpack, made even worse by the
water saturating it. She opens it, checking for damage. Luckily, knowing she’d be targeting the dam
in her escape, she took care when packing it to seal as many of her supplies as she could. Becca’s
journal sits in a puddle of water, but it’s unharmed and neatly sealed in a tight plastic bag. Clarke
sighs in relief.

“The journal’s safe.”

“Good,” says Bellamy. “Though I don’t know if it’ll be any more helpful now, with the end of it still
in code.”

“Her entries towards the end are coded, yes, but there are nonsensical words and passages written all
over, in the margins and along the edges. Drawings, too. Maybe something, some clue will become
clearer now that we’re outside. Any hint to get us to Kane.”

Bellamy shifts behind her, groaning at the movement and keeping his head hunched. “You
escaped… to go find Kane? That’s why you left.” It’s not a question.

“I escaped to find answers, and I wasn’t getting any in Arkadia. That was made very clear to both of
us.” Somehow, Clarke finds herself on the defensive.

“I get that, but certainly you’ve got to have something I’m missing here, some solid indication of
where Kane and his rebels are.” Her silence is telling, and she hates it. “Clarke, do you have any idea
where you’re going?”

“I have a few leads from the journal,” she huffs. “But anywhere outside must be better than back in
Arkadia, Bellamy. Things are getting so much worse, and I just…” she thinks about the revelation
about her dad, “I couldn’t take it anymore. Maybe it’s drastic—”

“I’d say so.”

“—But if I stayed any longer, I swear… I swear I would’ve gone crazy.” She rakes her hands
through her sodden hair, pushing the strands away from her face to drip down her back. All those
emotions she’d worked so hard to suppress – the pain and betrayal from that confrontation with her
mom – threaten to creep back up and overwhelm her. She tries to focus on her immediate
surroundings: the cold air, her soaked clothes, the dirt clinging to her skin and boots and the earthy,
mildew smell of the old tree overhead.

Bellamy’s voice loses its earlier edge. “After the administrative building and Foundation Day, you
cut me off. You wouldn’t talk to me, you were ignoring me. And then suddenly you’re running
away. What happened, Clarke?”

She takes a deep breath, struck by the realization that, for the first time in her life, she can speak
without the fear of being watched or overheard by Arkadian surveillance. “After Foundation Day,
Alie Pramheda came to my house.”

His brow pinches. “The Councilwoman?”

“Yes,” Clarke says. “My mom let her in and Alie held this… this intervention. She fixated on my
behavior as a ‘model Head’ and how my recent actions deviated from that.”

“Did she know about us at the administrative building? About what we found?”

Clarke shakes her head. “No, that’s the thing. She didn’t even mention that. She was focused entirely
on my being caught… caught kissing you.”
He blinks back at her, stunned. “Me? That’s what she found you out for?”

Eye contact feels like too much, so Clarke instead stares at the mud caking her boots. “She was concerned that I was breaking some unspoken rule and disputing the effectiveness of the system by becoming romantically involved with you.”

“Because I’m a Heart,” he deadpants. “Well, that’s ridiculous. We’re not romantically involved.”

“Of course not,” she jumps in too quickly, suddenly too aware of the small space they’re confined to.

“And even so, there’s nothing illegal about a Head and a Heart being together.”

“No, but think about it: when was the last time you saw a successful marriage between the two categories? Any Head that marries a Heart is essentially shunned and edged out of the jobs they’d otherwise earn, and the Heart gets regarded like a traitor by other Hearts.” She’d had plenty of time the last few days to think about this, and she’d yet to find an example of a Head and a Heart in a happy, prosperous union. “Alie seemed to imply that the system works better, and Arkadia runs more smoothly, with the categories separated.”

“They’re already separated,” he says, “But if she’s personally involving herself to keep it that way, it’ll only get worse.”

“I think she got involved because of my last name. It was clearly the kind of discussion that wasn’t supposed to be publicized. She was very keen on keeping this all discreet.”

“But come on, why not try to report this? Clearly it’s an abuse of power from a Council seat! Why didn’t you try to fight this, or at least tell me?”

“Because she threatened you.” As soon as the words leave Clarke’s mouth, she hates how whiny and weak they sound.

“Alie threatened me?”

“She threatened to hurt you, or worse. I couldn’t drag you deeper into my mess.” She keeps her eyes lowered, but she senses him leaning closer and trying to catch her gaze.

“This is our mess, Clarke. I’m already in it just as much as you are. You should’ve told me.”

“And risk Alie finding out? Bellamy, if she really killed her own sister to keep her quiet, there’s no telling what she would’ve done to you to hurt me. I won’t apologize for not taking that chance.”

He grimaces, frustrated, but he tightens his jaw and swallows a retort. “So you needed to get out of Arkadia to escape Alie’s eye and find Kane, and you used breaking Raven out of the incarceration center as your distraction.”

She shrugs, “The opportunity arose, and I couldn’t think of a better one.”

“And the people helping you, did they know where you were going? That you were really trying to escape? Did they know why you were doing this?”

“No, they didn’t,” she answers tightly, growing weary at these questions.

“So who was involved?”

“Wells, Finn, Atom and Oct—” Rattling off the names without thinking, Clarke barely catches herself on that last name. But she’s too slow. She can tell by the flicker across Bellamy’s features,
nostrils flaring slightly and eyes intensifying.

“What did you say?”

She pulls her lips into a thin line, but she knows she’s giving it away all the same.

“Clarke.”

She can’t hold his stare any longer.

“Was she involved?”

Finally, she squeezes out, “Octavia volunteered.” She can feel a wave of emotion roll off Bellamy’s shoulders, hot and unbridled. Again, this hollow is way too small for both of them. “We needed someone quick and nimble, and she offered. For Raven.”

“At what point were you going to tell me this?!”

“I wasn’t planning on running into you on the way to the dam.”

“So you weren’t going to say anything? Your plan was to slip out while my sister was risking herself to be a part of your distraction, and she didn’t even know about it? Do you not see how that’s so much worse?”

“I left a note for you, explaining everything. Explaining so much it’s dangerous. You would’ve gotten it tomorrow morning.”

“A note?” His bark of laughter is harsh and she flinches. “You manipulated them, Clarke! Octavia, Wells, all of them. You twisted their concern for Raven into something you could use to your personal advantage.” Something crackles in his eyes, a lightning she hasn’t seen since their first night together, after Octavia was shot and they stood arguing in her kitchen. But now, having seen how friendly and gentle his dark eyes could be… this was so much worse. “How could you do that?”

“I needed to get out. After reading everything Becca said, after everything we’ve seen, I can’t find a way to fix Arkadia from the inside. If I could get outside, find Kane, and somehow… somehow take on Arkadia and the Council and try and take down this corruption—”

“That’s exactly the kind of self-righteous bullshit I’d expect from a Head. Thinking you and only you can save everyone and everything. That you’ve calculated the odds and somehow you’re more important than anyone else.”

Again she suppresses, pushing those horrible secrets about her father’s death down and down and down. “There are things you don’t understand.”

“Of course there are,” he fires back. “And I don’t want to know them. Not anymore. Maybe you’re right, maybe it’s better if I’m not involved.” He turns, scooting back into the bark and away from her. She reaches out for him and he pulls back sharply. A hiss leaves his lips, not in anger, but… in pain.

“Bellamy?” Her eyes fully adjusted to the dark, she can see the unmistakable grimace across his features. He’s seething, yes, but there’s something else too. He turns further away from her, but something catches her eye: his hand pressed tightly against his left side. His shirt and jacket are damp, but his hand glistens with something darker than water.

_Blood._
“You’re hurt.” Clarke fixates on that spot and she gently pushes on his other shoulder to turn him. Thankfully, Bellamy lets her. His clothing is dark and damp, but even against that she can see the wide stain across his left flank. Through the center of the stain, the fabric of his shirt looks slashed. “Were you shot?”

“You tell me.” His voice is hoarse and hollow, some of the fight gone now that she’s caught him.

Using light fingers, she peels the sodden fabric off his skin. It makes a slick sound, and blood warms her fingertips. There’s no bullet, but clearly he got grazed by one. An angry gash slices across his skin, bruised and bleeding. She struggles to keep from sounding as angry as she feels. “And when were you going to tell me about this?”

“As soon as you were going to tell me about Octavia.”

She grits her teeth. His attitude isn’t helping her nerves. Even with her eyes adjusted to the dark, she needs more light. Clarke digs in her backpack and finds that small flashlight. She shakes it, cranks the handwheel a few time, and exhales when it sputters to life. She sets it onto the dirt ground, hoping her body will shield most of the light and keep the hollow from attracting attention.

Bellamy frowns at the flashlight. “Is it such a good idea to turn that on?”

She huffs, “You were grazed by a bullet. I need to clean the wound and stitch you back together. Would you like me to do that in the dark?”

“Point taken,” he says in a grumble, and shifts so he’s propped up against the interior of the hollow. Clarke feels like an idiot for not noticing the blood before. The damp clothes hid the stain well enough, and the earthy old tree smell must’ve covered the tang of blood in the air.

Leaning closer, Clarke gets a better look. It’s not a horrible wound, but their chances of infection are so much higher out here in the forest. “The graze isn’t very deep, so I don’t see anything lodged in there. Shouldn’t be any damage to internal organs. You got lucky.” She returns to her pack. Before leaving, she’d raided the med-kit at home, grabbing some basic supplies. She pulls out a small flask of disinfecting alcohol and rips a piece of gauze from a folded bundle. Thankfully, she’d at least had the sense to wrap the supplies in plastic, so they weren’t wet. “I need to clean it. This might sting.”

Bellamy nods, keeping his eyes fixed over her head as she pours alcohol onto the gauze. Without thinking to warn him, she presses the gauze against the wound.

He thrashes in pain, groaning. Instinctively, Clarke throws out a hand, her palm pressed flat against his chest to hold him steady. “Stay still!” she hisses out. Working more delicately now, she sponges away some of the blood. Under her other hand, she feels his heart racing wildly. She forgets that she’s touching him, and only remembers when she catches his gaze. Clarke pulls away sharply.

The wound doesn’t look as nasty with much of the blood cleared away, but it’s still a bad grazing gash about four inches long. It’ll need a few stitches, she confirms as her stomach sinks. Great. She’ll have to be extra careful out here in the forest. Not to mention she’ll be sewing up Bellamy, which is a strange-enough thought. It’s too close, too… is intimate the right word? Clarke shoves those thoughts down, feeling ridiculous. She’s a clinic apprentice for heaven’s sake, she can handle this.

She can handle this.

Clarke sets aside the blood-soaked gauze square and wipes her stained hands on her dark jacket. Returning to her pack, she uses some of her precious canteen drinking water to rinse her hands a little
bit – they’d have to find more freshwater later. It would be too risky to return to the reservoir. She finds her tiny suture kit and begins wiping the needle down with alcohol.

“So, am I gonna make it, doc?” Bellamy asks hoarsely.

But the question rings too loudly in Clarke’s ears: *Is he going to make it? Are either of them going to make it?* So far the hollow has protected them well enough, but what happens when they have to start traveling on foot? Will they still be pursued by guards from Arkadia? What about wild animals? Or any of the roaming bands Clarke heard horror stories of back in school – thugs and bandits and warlords who traversed the wilderness looking for settlements they could attack.

Clarke keeps her face tight and answers, “Let me sew you up and then we’ll see.”

“We need to run,” Octavia pants breathlessly as Raven scrambles to her feet.

“What are you doing here?” Raven’s voice crackles.

“What does it look like? Breaking you out.”

Raven hears the words, but it’s like she doesn’t really process the weight of them. Then her eyes rake over Octavia’s bandana pulled down under her chin, and the welding mask pushed onto her forehead… *her* welding mask. *What the hell is going on?*

“Are you out of your mind?” Raven hisses, not fully believing her eyes. Octavia is here, *here*, breaking her out of her cell. Where are the guards? How has she managed to get this far?

“Listen,” Octavia speaks with steel in her eyes, “The power won’t be down for much longer—”

“You knocked out the power?” Raven’s impressed.

“—So we’re working with a short window of time here. And unless you’d rather leave your fate up to the Council’s decision, I’d get moving.”

It doesn’t take much convincing before Raven nods. The smaller girl readjusts her bandana and mask. She digs in a pocket and tosses Raven a square of fabric to tie around her own face, then a sheer scrap to go over her eyes. Raven ties them quickly, covering her face. They step back out into the hallway.

It’s not as dark as her cell was, but *shit* it’s still dark. For a fleeting moment, Raven longs to see some sunlight again. With any luck, they’ll make it out and maybe she will.

That’s a thought for another time. Right now, she’s scanning the hallway with Octavia before her friend bounds off, leaving Raven to shuffle as quickly as she can on her bad leg. She’s got a pounding headache from dehydration and eating too little, but she pushes through it.

Then there’s the sound of footsteps careening to a stop towards the other side of the hall, and both of them turn. A guard stands poised with his gun out and ready to shoot. It’s a familiar face: Shaw.

*Fuck!*

Raven’s sure they’re dead, or she’s at least caught, but out of sheer desperation she links eyes with Shaw through her makeshift mask. She doesn’t know him, doesn’t like or care about him, but what else can she do?

He stands there longer than he should, the gun pointed at Octavia. Then, with no change in his face,
she shifts the gun slightly to the right and fires, striking the wall. A purposeful miss.

He might as well have screamed go! at her. Raven stands in disbelief, but she feels Octavia tug on her arm and pull her towards the stairs. Another two gunshots ring out overhead as they descend, clearly missing their target.

The hallways race by in a blur, and by some stroke of luck, they don’t encounter any other guards. Raven doesn’t understand it. But Octavia is quick on her feet and is smart on the run, apparently, waiting at corners and leading them into the most shadowy stretches as they carve their way towards an exit. They end at some small storage room with a shattered window. Octavia drags a crate under the window, muttering “Watch the glass” from under her disguise, and motions for Raven to climb up.

Raven grips the window frame as best as she can and pulls herself up. The jagged edges of the shattered panes scratch up her bare arms and along her shirt. Halfway through the window, she fumbles desperately for a ledge or something to grip to, her hands finding a nearby pipe. She clutches that and pulls the rest of her body through, swinging around and dropping to the ground.

Outside.

Octavia follows, only a little more gracefully than Raven, and she doesn’t pause for a second. “Not yet,” she says admonishingly and leads Raven out of the alleyway behind the incarceration center.

Outside, Arkadia looks strange without the usual lit streetlamps and light spilling from other buildings. Raven notices people gathering outside their homes, looking confused and chattering nervously with neighbors. “ Masks off,” Octavia says, tugging off her own and pulling up the hood on her jacket. She reaches under her belt to pull out a knit cap - the kind distributed for the colder months - and tosses it to Raven, who sweeps her hair up into it and yanks it low over her forehead. They don’t necessarily look normal, but they shouldn’t attract attention.

Raven is outside.

She follows Octavia across the dark street, fear and adrenaline surging through her body. Coming around a tree, she sees the shadowy form of Wells hovering nearby a dead streetlamp. Wells too?

She wants to fling her arms around her friend, but she doesn’t want any extra attention. Wells, wordlessly, agrees, but she can see the relief written across his face. “We need to move,” he says in a low voice. “Time is almost up.”

“Wait,” Octavia barks out. “Atom isn’t back yet?”

Wells looks confused, “I thought he was with you?”

“We split up to cover more ground.” Worry seeps into Octavia’s words. “We need to wait for him. He could just be running late, taking longer to get out.”

Wells glances down at his watch. “Octavia we’re cutting it too close. We need to leave now.”

“We wait!” She says, louder than she really should. Her glare is equally matched by Wells’s. He speaks in a low voice when he says, “If we get caught, then we’re all done for. Atom included. This will all be for nothing. We need to leave.”

Octavia’s small form trembles with frustration, but she caves. Then Raven is following her friends again, head pounding and leg aching horribly, but there’s no resting now. They head for an empty path and move fast. “Where are we going?”, she asks Wells.
“Somewhere we can hide you.”

“Hide me? Where?”

His words do little to reassure her. “It’s this idea – maybe it’s a crazy idea. But I think it might actually work. There’s someone who’s going to help us.”

Sleep and reality blur together in that little hollow. As Clarke stitched up Bellamy’s side, the pain and exhaustion from the evening – the fight with Emerson, the dam escape, swimming the reservoir and running in the woods after getting shot – it all catches up with Bellamy. He passes out before Clarke even knots the last stitch.

His sleep is restless and wild. Swathes of dark shapes and colors swirl across his mind with muddled images from the night. He’s not sure what’s real and what’s in his imagination. There’s Emerson reaching for his throat, then red blossoms across his front and spills over Bellamy’s entire dream-vision. It drips from his fingertips and pours from a wound at his own side. The blood blurs with water and then he’s swimming, racing towards the reservoir’s shore but never seeming to come closer. The water just keeps stretching on and on. He finds Emerson’s gun in his paddling hand and it becomes heavy, so heavy that it drags him underwater. There’s water in his eyes and ears and pressure pounds his head. He hears the roaring of the water and a droning siren and screaming, incessant pained screaming that somehow sounds like his sister.

She screams, but someone else calls his name. Over and over again, in time with the siren and the pressure pounding. Bellamy. Bellamy. Bellamy.

“Bellamy!”

His eyes fly open and he goes to sit up without thinking, until pain flashes across his abdomen and he groans. A face materializes in the dark.

“I’m sorry,” Clarke says quietly, “But you were moving around in your sleep and making sounds and I was afraid you’d get too loud.”

“I’m fine,” he grumbles. “Made the mistake of trying to catch some sleep.”

“Sleep will do you good. Your body needs to heal, and quickly if we’re going to be moving as soon as possible.”

Maybe it’s the half-sleepy brain, or the wave of emotions he just experienced again in his sleep, but... “Clarke, if this gets infected, or I can’t move fast enough, you go on. I’m not slowing you down.” She doesn’t respond. “I’m serious,” he croaks out, his throat feeling like gravel. She might be self-righteous, and yet... she’s the key – she’s got the journal and the pieces from Becca. She needs to find Kane. “I’m not risking you getting caught—”

“You’re out of your goddamn mind if you think I’m just going to leave you here.” Her words carry a bite, but there’s something else. Real fear, real raw emotion. Even though it shouldn’t, it startles him.

“Well fine,” he says. “You owe me anyways, after the stunt you pulled with Octavia. I’m not over that yet.”

“I didn’t expect you to be.” Even in the dim, Bellamy can see how exhausted Clarke looks. She’s got deep bags under her eyes, and every muscle looks both tensed and heavy at the same time. Noticing his stare, she busies herself with checking the bandage she’s got strapped to his side. It’s stained with blood, but no pus or other bad signs. She touches his arm briefly, then his forehead. “You don’t feel
warm, so hopefully no infection yet. That wound needs to stay clean.”

“You look exhausted, Clarke.”

She shrugs, as if it’s an irrelevant observation. “I can stay up on watch.”

“I don’t know what good do that’ll do us right now. We’re under a tree with nothing to protect ourselves with, and nowhere to run. And you’ll probably doze off anyways. You’re better off giving your body a rest.”

“I’ll rest later.”

“No, we both know you won’t. And you’ll be ready to drop as soon as daylight comes.” _She can be so damn stubborn sometimes._ He shifts his body as much as he can, pushing back close to the inner wall of the hollow. He reaches for Clarke, fingers hovering out in front of her but not touching her. Waiting for her.

Her tiredness wins out, because she inches closer and lays down in front of him. Perhaps it’s meant to be a protective position, but she seems smaller when she’s this sleepy. She stays a few inches away from his chest, and he can feel her heat but they don’t touch.

He shifts the arm underneath his body, trying to give her more space, but then her head rests on it and he freezes. She doesn’t say anything. He’s briefly taken back to the barn, to that other time they took shelter and shared body heat to keep warm. Why does this feel so different?

“You asked me earlier how I could do this,” she says in a small voice, her face turned away from him. “How I could just use my friends and Octavia like that.” He hears her take a shaking breath. “My father wanted to stand up against the sorting system, and the Council killed him. They made everyone believe it was a suicide. They let me, his own daughter, believe my father chose to end his own life. And the whole time, my mother knew.”

He can’t think of the right words, or even _any_ words, to make her feel better. Finally some of the pieces start falling together as he realizes just how deeply this must’ve hurt her. How broken she is now.

“Just…” her words tremble with her breath, “just make it to tomorrow, okay? Make it through the night and be okay.” He wants to see her face when she says these things, but he knows she won’t look at him. “I don’t think I can do this without you.”

This he can answer without a second thought. “That makes two of us.”

His sleep is still fitful, but he catches little interludes of calm slumber. And at some point – neither of them would exactly be sure when – she inches back into him and his arm reaches over to keep her close. And they stay like that.
Author's Note:

Thanks for reading and sticking with this story! This chapter got back to some more dialogue-heavy character moments rather than just moving plot, so that's been a nice change to write.

I'm excited to hear what you think of this latest installment, and I'll get the next one out as soon as I can.

Thanks!
-K.T.
Raven follows Wells towards a street lined with handsome, yet modest, homes. She walks quickly with her head down, recognizing this must be a wealthier Head neighborhood. But Wells walks with the confidence of being the Chancellor’s son, and if Octavia’s nervous, it doesn’t show. Soon, they turn to a grove of bushes and slip through, walking behind a long line of hedges at the back of several properties.

After a minute, Wells stops. He sticks his hand through the hedges and fumbles along the fence on the other side, feeling around… He sighs in relief and Raven sees a panel of fencing crack open: the panel’s had one side of nails removed. Someone prepared for this.

Wells slips through first, then beckons for Raven. Octavia follows last. They enter a small backyard, messy with overgrown bushes and trees. Whoever lives here clearly doesn’t spend a lot of time outside. Thankfully, the wild branches overhead seem to cover their path to the back door from any prying neighbor eyes. Raven follows Wells and holds her breath while he knocks in a pattern.

The door opens and a middle-aged man stands on the other side, with gray-streaked curly hair and wrinkles around his friendly eyes. He’s cautious, but not threatening. Raven recognizes him from guest lectures back in school – on engineering, one of her favorite subjects.

Jacapo Sinclair addresses Wells, speaking quietly. “Did you attract any attention?”

“I don’t think so,” Wells says. “We were careful.”

Sinclair nods once. His eyes finally land on Raven. She’s not surprised he remembers her fondly – she knew her work impressed him – but she’s honored he’d be willing to risk himself to help her.

“Nice mess you’ve gotten yourself into, Reyes.” His words are laced with his dry humor. “Let’s get you inside.”

Clarke sleeps too late. She feels it immediately when her eyes open to slivers of daylight on the other side of the ferns shielding the hollow. It’s bright enough to let her know they’re several hours into the morning.

She rouses herself quickly, sitting up and feeling a heavy arm slide off her stomach – Bellamy’s. Bellamy. She flips around to look at him. With the better light, she notices the scratches and scrapes along his freckled face – she likely wears some herself after their dash through the forest last night.
His face is calm for a moment, and she knows it’s cliché, but she can’t help but think he looks younger like this. It’s silly.

Trying to remain analytical, Clarke focuses on the color of his cheeks – not frighteningly pale or flushed with heat – and the absence of sweat: no clear signs of a fever. She glances down at the bandage wrapped to his left flank. It’s stained dark red, but thankfully not soaked through. Still, she’ll have to change it, and fairly soon.

Gently, she nudges his shoulder. “Bellamy.”

He’s awake in an instant, his dark eyes blinking rapidly to clear the sleep. She hadn’t noticed how long his lashes were before; they were the kind a girl might envy. Dear god, keep it together. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I got shot last night,” he answers groggily.

“You were grazed,” she clarifies. Pressing the back of her hand to his forehead, she feels for a fever. “Do you feel warm? Any chills?”

“Nothing unusual after sleeping out here.” He is right – last night, sleeping outside in wet clothing was miserable. After several hours, Clarke’s clothes are finally starting to dry, but in a gross, damp way that’s still uncomfortable. She’d love to get out in the sun to speed it up, but she’s not sure they can risk going out yet. And there’s still Bellamy’s injury to contend with.

Carefully, she unwinds the bandage around his torso, trying to keep her attention trained on the wound and not his muscled abdomen. She really shouldn’t have slept next to him like that, curled intimately against him, since now it’s got her mind all muddled. Peeling back the gauze, she sees a deep red stain and puckered skin under her stitches, but no signs of infection. They’re not in the clear yet, but it could be a lot worse.

“No fever, no infection,” she says, hope creeping into her voice. “I’ll replace the gauze and we’ll keep checking it throughout the day. How does it feel to move?”

He shifts onto his back, and she can see the pain splashed across his face. “Not great,” he says with a grimace.

“Then rest for now, and we’ll try sitting up later. I don’t want to risk you ripping a stitch.” He makes a face. “Yes?”

“I’m a sitting duck here. I can’t run or hide if I can’t even move.”

“You can stay hidden if you don’t move.” She tears a new square of gauze to replace the stained one. “We’ll wait until you’re strong enough to walk, then we keep going.”

“Clarke –”

She can hear it in his tone of voice, so she cuts him off. “I’m not leaving you behind. I’d appreciate the extra set of eyes and ears when we’re on the move again, and I don’t mind waiting for you. There’s no rush now that we’re outside.”

He grumbles something about slowing her down, but she’s not interested in listening. Instead, she focuses on cleaning the wound – using more of her precious disinfecting alcohol in these crucial days of heightened infection risk – then padding it with fresh gauze and rewrapping the bandage around his torso. It’s impossible to ignore his body now. In the better light, she sees his skin here is just as tanned as the rest of him, deep and natural, but less freckled. Instead, there’s the lightest dusting of
dark hair extending below his navel and traveling downwards, towards…

Clarke tugs too tightly on the bandage, jostling the gauze, and Bellamy flinches. “Sorry,” she mutters quickly, embarrassed.

She doesn’t want to leave him, but she’s got to get out of this little hollow.

“You okay?” he asks.

She nods, then says, “We’ll need more water, since there’s two of us and your body is healing. I should go look.”

His hand reaches for her arm, grabbing lightly, weakly. “By yourself?”

“I don’t have a choice. Moving you right now would be flat-out dangerous. We’ll run out of water sooner between the both of us, and dehydration won’t help you heal.”

Thankfully, he doesn’t fight her on this, because he must see that there’s no other good option. Instead he says, “Do you have anything to defend yourself with? Just in case.”

Clarke returns to her pack and pulls out the best weapon she could come up with: a kitchen knife stolen from home. It’s not very large, but it’s the biggest one Arkadia issues domestically, and it’ll have to do. Wrapped in a makeshift plastic sheath, it fits tightly inside her boot. “Good enough, I suppose.”

“I should’ve kept the gun,” Bellamy mutters, and Clarke notices how his face has crumbled back into that distant stare and self-loathing shadow. “They must’ve retrieved his body by now, right?”

“I’m sure they have,” Clarke says quietly.

“I’m officially a murderer.”

“You’re a survivor. There’s a difference.” There has to be.

His eyes finally meet hers, and they’re a swirl of pain and exhaustion and regret. But he smiles dryly, unconvincingly, and says, “No turning back now, right?”

She nods. “I’ll be as quick as I can. I won’t go near the reservoir, and I’ll try to stay close.” With the hills nearby and mountains not far off, she’s guessing there must be some runoff streams cutting through the lush forest. “If something’s wrong, if you need me…” Her voice drifts off. She doesn’t know what he should do.

He answers darkly, “I guess you’ll hear me either way.”

Clarke passes him the canteen, letting him drink before she finishes off the rest. Then, stretching her legs and peering through the ferns, she checks for any signs of guards or otherwise before slipping out from the hollow. Her back aches as she stands up, but at least she stands alone at the bottom of the ravine. Sunlight filters in through the leafy canopy overhead, and beyond she sees a blue sky. For the middle of the day, the forest is calm. There’s the distant chirp of birds and squirrels running along branches, but no signs of danger. Yet.

The coast clear, Clarke scans the ravine’s walls for the best way out, before deciding against it and instead following the curve of the ditch deeper into the forest. It’s just one more barrier protecting her from those guards on bikes. She moves carefully through the undergrowth, trying to place her footsteps on quiet ground. Every twenty steps or so, she pauses and listens.
It’s still dawning on her that she’s outside. Even in the forested edges of Arkadia, where she used to climb trees with her friends along the wall, it never felt as wild and free as this. She’s fearful, yes – she’s in a wide world full of unknowns, and they’re likely still being hunted – but there’s something undeniably exciting about it all.

Clarke pauses again, listening to the soft fuzzy silence of the forest – a “silence” blurred with the rustling of leaves in the breeze, one bird calling to another, some distant creature scurrying down a trunk and bugs flitting around. But another sound: a hushed gurgling of running water.

She pinpoints it on her left and crosses to the ravine wall. It’s a little shallower here, with wide stones and protruding roots that should work well enough for footholds. Taking a minute, Clarke mentally captures her surroundings, noting the trees and rocks and memorable features. She needs to remember her way back. Then, she climbs.

At the top, she lands in a thick patch of bushes and shoulders her way through, still following that water sound. It’s only been a few minutes when she spots the jagged line of rocks and dirt, with a streak of trickling silver water slicing through.

Trying to balance her eagerness with caution, Clarke skids down to the stream. She stumbles once and her hand shoots out to the nearest bush to grab. Instead, she feels a sting and stifles a yelp. Pulling back, Clarke sees the purplish stain of… a squashed berry. A blackberry.

Sure enough, the bush is full of those onyx berries, hanging heavy on the branches. Clarke’s stomach groans at the sight. She hasn’t touched any of the rations she packed yet, knowing she’d have to share them with Bellamy and hope they could stretch. Now, she doesn’t waste any time in picking blackberries and stuffing them into her jacket pockets. Hungry, she pops one in her mouth. Thankfully, they’re safe to eat.

Pockets full, Clarke uncaps the canteen and bends by the stream. The water runs clear over the smooth stones of the creekbed, and she fills her canteen until it overflows. She takes a swig. It’s not the filtered water of Arkadia, but it’s clean and cold and there’s plenty of it. Clarke drinks half the canteen before refilling it again for Bellamy. She splashes some of the water onto her face and neck, then scrubs her hands thoroughly. There’s dried blood still under her fingers – Bellamy’s. She’s so grateful last night is over with.

Clarke turns to leave with her canteen and berries when she spots a familiar dusting of yellow – dandelions growing in a little clearing several paces away. Her mind flips back to school, to some dense reading about plants and different special uses.

Dandelions are edible. Feeling especially lucky, she doesn’t return to the ravine until she’s pulled up two large handfuls of the flowers. She wants to venture further, to gain some sense of their current location, but she’d promised Bellamy. She moves quickly across the ravine bottom, steps light and eyes roving. She hears something moving through a bush at the top of the wall and her blood freezes, but it’s only a deer. It disappears before Clarke can even get a good look at it.

Soon, the tree trunks grow massively wide and things look familiar. Clarke spots the enormous fern at the base of their tree and brushes aside the leaves. “Bellamy?”

“Here,” is his muffled answer from inside the hollow. As she climbs inside, she almost crashes right into him. Her eyes need a minute to adjust to the shadow, but Bellamy has shifted closer to the mouth of the hollow, leaning on his side against the interior.

“I thought we said no moving?” She notices his clenched fists and how he’s bleeding through the bandage she just applied. “Bellamy!”
“I heard something moving and I wanted to get a better look,” he says, clearly in pain but not wanting it to show.

“Well, brilliant decision. You’ve clearly ripped a stitch.” Upon closer examination, she realizes he’s ripped two. She shrugs off her jacket, pockets still full, and gently sits it in a corner with the canteen. Then it’s back to sewing him up again. This time, at least they’re both used to it.

Reapplying a new bandage, Clarke tries to keep the growl out of her voice as she says, “We’re burning through this gauze too quickly. If we run out, then we’re cutting up your shirt first.”

“If you insist, princess.” There’s something mocking in his voice – he’s really joking with her right now? – and she wonders if he noticed her staring at his body earlier. She keeps silent. After a moment, he asks, “Did you find water?”

She nods. “There’s a little creek not far from here. The water seems clean and safe to drink. Plus I found a bunch of blackberries and dandelions, so more food.” They could save the preserved rations for now.

“A forest feast.” Bellamy eases back against the side of the hollow, testing the new stitches as Clarke thoroughly wipes her hands clean. She notices a little more of the old Bellamy back in his face, some more clarity in his eyes. Clarke fetches her jacket and dumps the berries and dandelions out on the lining.

Neither cares about looking too hungry as they dig in, popping berries like they haven’t eaten in weeks. Even the dandelions, though they’re unusual to eat and have an unfamiliar taste, are ripe enough to still be edible. Clarke chews on a dandelion leaf, adjusting to the texture, and watches Bellamy eat berries one at a time, making them last. His fingertips quickly stain pink.

“What’s your favorite food?” She finally asks, not sure why she says it.

He looks up. “Odd question.”

“I’m in a questions kind of mood.”

He thinks for a moment. “I don’t know if I have a favorite.” He continues, expecting her to protest. “I know, it’s lame. But… since we’ve lived in Arkadia – and since before then, really – we haven’t exactly been able to be picky about food. Rations were always stretched at home.” He pauses, lost in thought, then says, “Does coffee count?”

“That’s not exactly food.” Clarke would know, she’d drink several cups a day working long hours at the clinic.

“Then maybe…” His voice trails off, and she realizes he’s caught in some memory. “Before Arkadia, when Mom and Octavia and I were outside and roaming, we lived for a few weeks at this small settlement off a river. There was an old woman there who’d pieced together a real oven for herself, something made from scraps but it worked fine. She made this bread – I don’t know where she even found the ingredients for it, real ingredients like flour and sugar. But it was sweet and fluffy and warm, and when I was little, I thought it was the best thing in the world. So maybe that.”

Clarke gets the sense there’s more to the story. “Did you stay with her long?”

“No.” His face falls. “There was a raid in the middle of the night, and they came to loot the settlement and destroy what they didn’t want. I don’t remember much – Mom got the three of us out and we ran hard – but I remember they didn’t want the oven, or the old woman.”
“I’m sorry.”

But he shakes it off. “My turn: how did you learn to swim?”

The corner of her mouth pulls up in a little grin. “So we’re playing a game now?”

“I suppose. Answer the question.”

“My dad taught me, actually. He thought it was very important that I learned at some point, so we went to an old pond out along the outskirts of the agricultural district. A friend of his owned the property. We spent a whole afternoon together, in the summer, and then we went back twice after so I could practice.” The thought makes her smile, a bit sadly. “How about you?”

“Similar story – it was Mom. But more out of self-preservation than anything, it was well before Arkadia.”

“Do you remember a lot about your life before Arkadia?”

“Honestly, a lot of it has grown fuzzier the older I get. Some parts I’d gladly forget, but there are others – good memories, even just a few – that I don’t want to lose.” There’s a guarded finality in his voice. “My turn—”

“Wait, that wasn’t a real question, that didn’t count!”

“Of course it counts. You took your turn.”

Clarke throws a berry at him, but he catches it. It stains his palm as it squashes between his fingers. “Attacking an invalid. Real nice, Clarke.”

“Just ask your question.”

“Why did you kiss me at the administration center?”

Clarke’s stomach drops to her feet. Something’s shifted in his teasing face. His eyes feel too intense on her face. She tries to keep her expression blank, but her mouth squirms. What the hell is he doing?

“You know perfectly well.”

“Yeah, but I want to hear you say it.”

This is it. This is that fine line they keep dancing around, somehow more than friends but always coming up just short of something else. Suddenly, Clarke’s interactions with Bellamy burn in her mind like a branding iron. Their shared whispers and the intimacy of his gaze. The night spent shivering in the barn. The ferocity with which he fought Emerson, then that naked fear in his eyes during the fallout. Their emotions too plain to see, too out in the open.

The way she’d been so scared of losing him last night, and the way she fell asleep curled into him, his arm both guarding her and pulling her closer.

Clarke wants to let it all tumble out of her mouth right then and there. But admitting he means something to her, something more, means she has just so much more to lose. Now’s not the time. Not when there’s still so much risk, so much danger.

“As an excuse.” Her voice is small and strained. “So the guard wouldn’t question why we were there.”
He swallows. “That’s all there is to it, then.”

She sits perfectly still, but she can’t breathe. It’s like they’re both hanging on some precipice, waiting for something to break. Waiting for the fall.

“Yes,” she lies.

She searches his face for some reaction, but he only reaches for the water canteen and takes a long swig. By the time he sets it back down, his face is unreadable. A handsome stone mask.

“Your turn.”

“Why did you ask about the kiss?” She nearly cuts him off with her question.

There aren’t many places to look inside their hollow, so Bellamy’s gaze settles on a patch of bark somewhere to the side before it rolls back around to Clarke. His words are nonchalant. “To make sure we’re both on the same page.”

“And are we?”

He cracks a smirk. “Two questions back to back.”

“Oh shut up,” she groans at him. She’s about to chew him out more when she notices he’s staring at her leg. There’s an enormous beetle crawling up it, black and glossy. Clarke flails in surprise, kicking up dirt and old bark and sending the beetle flying into the air.

Bellamy just laughs at her.

They spend most of the day in the hollow, and every so often Clarke rechecks Bellamy’s wound for any bad signs. He’s careful with his torso, making sure he doesn’t stretch or shift the wrong way and tear something open again. He wants them to get moving as soon as possible, but honestly he’s not sure he could stand up yet, let alone walk.

Not that Clarke would let him. She frets over him with the experience of a doctor and the concern of a close friend. It’s a combination that’s a bit smothering, but Bellamy won’t lie to himself – he likes being at the center of her attention.

It’s that little selfish part of him that asked about the kiss. There is still that lingering thought – that teasing, torturous thought – that maybe the kiss was more than just a distraction for her. That maybe, he is just as important to her as she’s become to him.

There are moments when he notices her watching him, and not necessarily in an assessing-an-invalid way. There isn’t much to do in their hollow, besides sleep or talk quietly. He doesn’t mind getting as much rest as possible, and it is nice talking to Clarke. They review Becca’s journal, revisiting the coded parts for any chance at unlocking something new. It is still as dizzyingly confusing as before. It is still as dizzyingly confusing as before. Clarke does, however, point out some of the margin drawings, little scribbled sketches and doodles that bordered on abstract. Her trained eye sees things he missed.

“No, look,” she’d say, rotating the journal sideways. “I think she’s marking a weird tree. Notice the hatching along here, it almost looks like tree bark.”

They comb the handwritten scrawl and drawings, Clarke folding over the pages with potential “clues” that stand out. It’s not a lot, but at least he can feel like they’re making some progress while he keeps them stuck in hiding. For the hundredth time, he mentally curses himself for getting shot.
They finish off the berries and dandelions, and – understanding they need to consume some protein – Clarke digs into her rations stash and pulls out two strips of dried jerky meat. It’s tough and tastes like smoky leather, but it’s protein.

Eventually they return to the question game, this time keeping things lighter. Bellamy understands it – they’ll keep dancing around it as long as they can. Maybe now’s not the time to address any deep feelings.

They bounce off questions of favorite colors, hobbies, types of days and weird habits. Bit by bit, a clearer picture of Clarke comes into view. A Clarke that’s more than the stone-cold Head he once took her to be – a Clarke who loves sage green, thick sweaters, and sitting by a window on a rainy day. And art: Clarke loves art. Almost looking embarrassed, she digs to the bottom of her pack and pulls out a slender tin with eight colored pencils, a luxury in Arkadia and her prized possession. He’s completely intrigued by this side of her.

It shines through even more when he asks her, point blank, “If you could be anything, what would you be?”

She sits hugging her knees, leaning against the bark. Her hair, now dry, hangs in loose waves around her face, catching the light slipping between the ferns and shining gold. “I think the ‘right’ answer would be a full-time clinic doctor, since that’s practically what I’ve been raised to want. But honestly, if I could make a living off of it… I think I would be an artist. I don’t know how I’d do it, but the thought of waking up every morning to make something new just sounds exciting.” She smiles to herself, a little tentative grin. “I suppose now that I’m beyond Arkadia, maybe somehow I can actually find a way.”

He doesn’t care if it’s blind hope on her face, because it’s a good look for her.

“How about you?” she asks back. “What would you be?”


She gives him a look, “That’s not what I mean. Don’t give a lame answer.”

“There’s nothing lame about that, Clarke.”

“I guess so.” She watches the ferns gently sway in the breeze, shifting the shadows cast into the hollow. “Maybe that’s all we can hope for, wherever we’re going. If we find Kane. Just hope that we’ll be safe, and then maybe later, we can be happy.”

He tries not to think about the people he’s leaving behind, and he can guess she’s doing the same.

They spend another night in that hollow, and Bellamy forces Clarke to try and sleep. He’s been resting all day, he tells her, so he’s more than capable to take the first watch. It’s no use trying to argue with him about this, even though she’s worried he’ll just let her sleep through the whole night and never wake her to switch.

By now, he’s propped himself up to sit against the inside of the hollow, and his stitches seem to be holding. It gives him a better view of the entrance for watching. Clarke scoots along the dirt ground until she’s sidled up next to him, leaning against the old wood. Her head comes up several inches below his, and she’s reminded of how much taller he is than her – something she’s basically forgotten during their time crouched and sitting beneath the tree.

There’s more color in his face now, and the inside of his lips are stained dark red from the
blackberries they’d shared.

“Try to sleep a little,” he says in a quiet voice, everything around her softened by the darkness outside. She figures if the scouting guards haven’t found them by now, then they’ll be safe for the night until they start moving again. With any luck, that will be in the morning.

Clarke leans back, eyes closed and exhaling. In an instant, she feels so heavy. It was another day of nerves and adrenaline pumping through her, with the risk of hiding out in the woods. And now, closing a curtain on the day and finally settling down for rest, exhaustion washes over her. Her head feels like it weighs a hundred pounds, and without thinking much about it, she lets it fall to her left, onto Bellamy’s shoulder.

He leaves it there.

And when some of her hair drifts into her face, fluttering gently with her breathing but her arms feel like they’re made of lead, he softly pushes the strands out of her face and keeps brushing them back slowly… slowly… until the rhythm of the silent gesture sends her drifting to sleep.

“Bellamy!”

He wakes immediately to her whisper, hearing alarm in her hushed voice. Clarke’s forward in a crouch, that kitchen knife in her left hand ready for pounce. All the color has drained from her cheeks, and in the dim light from outside, he sees her eyes and wide and panicked. She mouths the words just as he hears the footsteps: someone’s out there.

He hears slow, steady crunching on the rocky ground beyond the fern. Through the leaves, he sees something shift as a figure walks in front of the bush, someone wearing dark clothing and heavy boots. They pause, looking at something, then – judging by the sounds – come closer.

Clarke’s head is nearly at the top of the hollow, but she waits in that crouch, rocking on the balls of her feet. He feels completely useless. Clarke’s going up against a guard – who knows how many others there are? – with a kitchen knife and he can’t do anything about it.

Then it all happens too fast. Someone brushes aside the ferns and Clarke lunges, aiming the knife at the boot that enters the hollow. But then she seems to stumble and miss her target, clipping the boot and stabbing the ground, as the barrel of a gun swings down, stopping an inch from her nose.

Then a face appears, one not covered by a guard’s helmet, but streaked with mud. There’s a dirty headband pulled across the forehead, and long hair that’s tucked back into a braid. It’s a woman not much younger than him.

And she’s still got a massive rifle trained at Clarke.

“Put the knife down,” she says in a steady voice, like she’s rehearsed this, “or I shoot.”

Clarke, still crouched with the blade in her hand, stares daggers into the stranger. No one moves, no one breathes.

“Put it down.” The woman says again, but there’s something in her tone that’s almost exasperated, like she’d hate to actually pull the trigger.

“So you can just kill us and raid our bodies anyways?” Clarke asks in a deadpan.

“If I wanted to kill you, it would’ve happened already.” From what he can see of the woman, her
dark pants and jacket are mottled with mud, mostly likely to keep her camouflaged. The garments look old, but not like the hoarded random clothing of the nomadic wanderers he remembered from his childhood. This is more organized, more calculated – a uniform. From under that headband, her eyes dart down to the knife in Clarke’s hand again.

“You’re Arkadian.” She must’ve noticed the tattoo.

Clarke’s hand recoils slightly, but she doesn’t lower the knife. Bellamy wishes he was able to defend himself, but he honestly doesn’t know what he would do – there’s something in this woman’s face that says she doesn’t want to hurt them if she can avoid it.

“Put the knife down,” she speaks slowly. “And come out from there unarmed. You’ll do it quickly and quietly. If you make any move to attack me, my friend out there—” she jerks her head over her shoulder, “—won’t hesitate to pull his trigger. Clear?”

“Crystal,” Bellamy answers for them in a low growl, and Clarke’s head wheels around. He sees the question in her eyes and just answers it by starting to pull himself into a crawling position. He makes it halfway onto his knees when he feels the searing pain in his side. He grimaces.

“He’s hurt,” Clarke tells the woman, almost begging in her voice. But she doesn’t falter, keeping her rifle trained on them and backing up slightly, leaving a space for them to leave the hollow. Clarke finally drops the knife onto the ground and moves to Bellamy’s side, steadying him as they crawl out of the hollow.

They stand slowly, and Bellamy feels several joints pop as he rises to full height. By the time he’s up, stars dance in the frame of his vision and his side feels like it’s on fire. But at least now, once he’s standing, he’s not moving it much. He spots the second gunner across the ravine and halfway up the side, perched between bushes and dressed in similar camouflage. It’s impossible to gauge how old he is, since all Bellamy can really see of him is floppy brown hair and grimy goggles.

After nodding at her companion, the woman ducks back under the tree for Clarke’s backpack and starts rifling through. Next to him, Clarke tenses.

“You’re running away.” The woman poses it as a fact, not a question. “You would never have made it very far, you know. Not with the both of you and barely enough supplies for one person.”

Bellamy speaks to keep the seething Clarke quiet. “Last minute change of plans.”

The woman nods slowly. “So you’re running from something then. From what?”

“Arkadia isn’t safe anymore.”

“Ha! Arkadia’s never been safe. They love to talk for hours about security but that’s all bullshit.” She reaches in and pulls out Becca’s journal, curiosity on her face.

Clarke takes an instinctive step forward, “Don’t touch that!”

“She said don’t move!” The voice comes from the second gunner, a man’s voice that’s unexpectedly young. He’s ready to shoot.

“Jasper!” The woman holds a hand up to stop him, then turns back to Clarke. “What is this?”

“I can’t tell you,” Clarke pants, “until I know who you both are.”

“Not going to happen.”
“I know you’re from Arkadia,” Clarke begins. “And I’m guessing your friend is too, judging by those goggles. You were both runaways at some point, weren’t you?” No answer, so she continues. “In Arkadia they’d talk about children who would go missing, or some accident would happen but they’d never find a body. But they weren’t dead, they’d escaped. You escaped.”

There’s silence all around, and Bellamy can hear his own pulse pounding in his ears, giving rhythm to Clarke’s words.

“That journal is important because we need to find someone, and I think it might hold the key.”

“Who?”

Blood roaring in his ears, almost dizzy from the pain of standing, Bellamy takes a leap of faith. “Kane.”

The flicker in the woman’s eyes gives it away: she knows exactly who Bellamy’s talking about, and maybe even knows where he is. He goes on, “And you can take us to him.”

“Why the hell should we do that?” The second gunner – Jasper – calls out.

“Because we’re two runaways from Arkadia looking for shelter and a chance at a fresh start. Because we see things that are very wrong in Arkadia and if there’s any sort of a resistance that exists, then we want to be a part of it.” He looks down at Clarke, who watches him with wide eyes. “Because she’s the daughter of Jake Griffin and she carries the journal of Becca Pramheda, and I’m willing to bet my own life that those two names mean something to your Kane.”

Finally, the woman looks down at the journal in her hands and cracks it open, rifling through the pages and skimming. In a voice that’s much quieter now, she says, “You might even be telling the truth.”

“You can’t be serious, Harper.” Jasper leaves his post and comes closer, gun still raised.

“I can’t read all of this journal, but just flipping through I’ve already seen Kane’s name several times.” She turns to Clarke and Bellamy. “What’s this coded part say?”

“We don’t know,” Clarke answers. “But we’re hoping that if we take it to Kane, maybe he might help us crack it.”

A tense, thick silence hangs between the four of them before Harper shoves the journal back into Clarke’s backpack, still refusing to hand anything over. “Alright. You’re not cleared yet, but we’ll put your story to the test and see if it checks out. If you’re truly who you say you are, and not spies, then we’ll take you to Kane. If we find anything that even suggests you’re lying, you’re dead meat. Understood?”

Bellamy swallows dryly and nods. Clarke does the same.

“Perfect.” Harper seals up the backpack and pulls it onto her own shoulders. She nudges Bellamy’s arm with the butt of her rifle. “Start walking.”
Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note:
Thank you all for your patience as I got this chapter together – just moved into a new apartment and wanted to get this published before my university classes start up again. This chapter I really wanted to focus on the Bellamy and Clarke dynamic and slowing things down a little, so I hope you’ve enjoyed it. We’re going to meet a lot of characters very quickly in the next few chapters – if you’ve got a favorite character from the show and we’ve haven’t seen them here yet, they’re probably coming up :) Let me know what you thought of this chapter! As always, I’m forever grateful for your reviews and support.
-K.T.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!