In the Screaming Silence

by natkate

Summary

In the wake of Clarke's rise to the throne of the Ice Nation, she is left with a seemingly insurmountable obstacle, an inconquerable mission - the task of finding the person she'd lost somewhere along the line. Believed to be dead by everyone she ever cared about, Clarke must now face the reality of an existence crafted from the very source of her pain, confront the deception that had been guiding her steps for so long now. How could she possibly handle it all knowing the things she'd done? How was she supposed to exist in this world with a face so unrecognizable to even her own eyes? How was she supposed to come face-to-face with the one person in existence who could legitimately destroy her?

Notes

GUESS WHO'S BACK?!?!! Lol I told y'all it wouldn't be long, didn't I? (;
Thank you so much for the amazing response to Part 1. It motivated me to get this first chapter of Part 2 out to you that much faster, and I'm forever grateful for the wonderful support that so many have given me. Every comment and kudo is truly appreciate beyond belief.
You'll be getting a first glimpse into Queen Clarke of Azgeda with a lot of feels mixed in (hopefully). I also tried to employ some symbolism in certain parts, so I hope it carries over well... The pace is meant to ebb and flow, to speed up and slow down, weaving right alongside Clarke's mental state, so hopefully it goes as well as intended.

For those of you who've stuck with me this long, I hope you're as excited as I am about embarking on this second part together. There's plenty of plot and tons of Clexa to come, so stay tuned...(;  

Without further ado, here is the first chapter of Part 2 of BWBS!  
Enjoy (: 

See the end of the work for more notes.
Clarke had forgotten when her birthday was.

She'd figured that it'd probably occurred during the time that she'd been in solitary for her first couple of months in Azgeda, but she really couldn't be sure. She'd gone so long without knowing what day it was - what month, even - that it must've completely passed her by at some point...

She was 18 now.

18 years old, and in charge of an entire kingdom - with more blood on her hands in the span of months than that of what stains the consciences of most humans after an entire lifetime ...

How on earth had she gotten here?

It'd been a month since she'd killed Nia and risen to power in her place - a month since her entire existence as a numbed foot-soldier had flipped itself on its head and placed her on a pedestal elevated by the death of innocence, boosting itself above the lives of the simple, the ordinary. Separating her from every part of herself she thought she'd been comfortable with at one point, forcing her into a position tinged red and cast in the shadow of vengeance...

Unlike her predecessors, though - and despite the training she'd been forced to rely on in order to solidify her authority - , Clarke had been using her platform of power slightly differently than it'd ever been used before, holding her reign to a completely unprecedented standard than that of any other ruler before her:

Empathy.

No matter how many times Nia had tried to beat it out of her - no matter how many times she'd bled trying to be free of it - , Clarke couldn't seem to deny the most basic of facts about herself, her default setting, it seemed - she cared ... Though she'd had to suppress it for months out of the overwhelming need to survive and the fight to simply remain in the same place on the food chain, things were different now - Clarke was no longer fighting.

She was leading ...

She'd become the self-fulfilling prophecy that the people of Azgeda had always believed her to be - the skai prisa turned Mountain-Slayer sent to save them all, help lead them find a place in which they no longer had to survive, but where they could actually thrive .
In the span of a single month, Clarke had showed them more compassion, more human decency, than many of them had experienced under the leadership of every past ruler before her, combined. She listened to their concerns with an open mind, often spending hours at a time with each individual simply talking through their problems, doing the best to come up with a solution. She mediated conflicts between groups of warriors or merchants and their customers that normally would've seen each member of both parties tied up and whipped for causing Nia the inconvenience, listening calmly and quietly while both sides aired their grievances. No punishments were handed down in these cases - only compromises, agreements that could be reached on all fronts that would prevent the problem from escalating. Clarke ruled by observation, erred on the side of reason and logic, and did not act until she felt she'd listened to every possible detail that could be of value in the making of an executive decision. She didn't get much sleep what with the amount of time spent in her throne room, but it brought her more energy than she'd ever remembered having when she was able to resolve issues in this way - when she was able to spare a life, extend a kindness that hadn't previously existed in this kingdom...

Her first act as Queen had been getting rid of that damned bell. It'd been burned along with the bodies of Nia, Ontari, and the dissenting guards on Clarke's first official day as Haiplana. Though Clarke knew she'd be forever haunted by the sound, she also recognized it as the first step in a slow and steady recovery process to a place of freedom - a place in which her mental state wasn't controlled by an object, a sound, or even a person ...

After the burning, the people of Azgeda had taken to the streets to celebrate, playing music, dancing, and drinking until their hearts were content for the first time in decades. Clarke had watched on from the main stage, a ghost of a smile dancing across her worn features, feeling as though a strange burden had lifted despite the fact that her shoulders felt heavier than ever. Roan had drunk himself into a stupor, rambling on about his brilliance - still an utter mystery to the blonde, his unsolved enigma of an existence her only reason for keeping him alive at this point - while Echo had stood by Clarke's side, guarding her new Queen and watching over the crowd with a genuine smile on her face.

Though some of the old guard had been adamantly against it at first, Clarke's second official order of business had been to get rid of the traditional punishment system that had existed since the formation of Azgeda as the northernmost clan. No longer would Clarke allow her new kingdom to rely on the death penalty as the default sentence for even the smallest of crimes committed, occasionally substituted with physical mutilation if Nia happened to be in a good mood that day. The extreme nature of the woman's regime had left behind a terrified population, every single member of Azgeda living in constant fear of retribution that would come should they ever step out of line in any way. That system was as barbaric as it was ineffective, and it was the first of many laws to be undone under Clarke's command.

In its place now stood a system that Clarke had spent several days and nights working non-stop to create, modeled after the democratic systems from Before that required a fair trial be held for every non-lethal crime committed - crimes the blonde had outlined in a new compendium that took the best parts from the old law and combined them with regulations Clarke had gleaned from overheard conversations between Lexa and her many advisors. Though it would take time for the people of Azgeda to re-train themselves to participate in a system where their voices were actually heard and respected, the overwhelmingly positive response she'd gotten after its implementation had been enough to provide a kind of early reassurance to her. Besides, it'd only seemed fitting in Clarke's mind that Azgeda align themselves with the laws that governed the rest of the clans in the Coalition,
and it brought her the first surge of joy she'd felt in months to be able to model, perhaps, the most crucial facet of her crown after the best leader she'd ever known - if only to hold a piece of Lexa that much closer to her somehow...

For crimes of a more serious nature, such as various forms of assault or - in the most extreme of cases - murder, Clarke would hear each case in private, determining the adequate punishment necessary after each individual case, typically doing her best to avoid killing at all costs these days (if only to spare her peace of mind for once). Though the system was new and had only just been implemented - and would take years to truly become law for the people of Azgeda so set in their ways -, Clarke had an overwhelming sense of faith that the transition would be successful, that a re-invigorated sense of loyalty and allegiance to a set of laws that worked would bring about an era of prosperity the clan had never known before...

If nothing else in her life remained, Clarke now, at the very least, had a sense of hope again.

Snow crunched beneath her feet as Clarke jogged through the forest in the frigid air of morning, pushing herself harder than usual before the long day ahead of her - undoubtedly running from her shadow that seemed to be growing closer and closer with every step she took...

For, first thing the following morning, Clarke, Roan, and Echo would leave Azgeda for the first time in over a year, setting off on a journey to Polis for the annual festival held in honor of the formation of the Coalition - an event which all clan leaders and their head advisors were required to attend. An event during which the true identity of Azgeda's new Queen would finally be revealed...

Jax had remained in Azgeda for a couple of weeks, recovering from his injuries and assisting Clarke in any possible way during the process of her drafting rough outlines of the clan's new laws. Much to Clarke's surprise, he was able to provide a great deal of insight into the clan's previous procedures, speaking from the perspective of one who knew then well enough to defy them - and, mercifully, preventing her from having to deal with Roan more often than was absolutely necessary...

He'd recounted Clarke's memorial to her, going into excruciating detail in describing how her friends had wept and seemed to be consumed by their misery - far too much for Clarke's sanity to stand, really. He'd then talked about the strange shift in the air that'd occurred in Polis, how off it'd felt for all of them to live in a time of unprecedented peace - how everything had felt so wrong without the resident pediatric healer of Polis traveling around to make house calls throughout the city. Upon noting Clarke's devastatingly somber demeanor, though, Jax had immediately changed the direction of his storytelling, reconciling himself to try and ease her mind in any possible way as opposed to unraveling it further...

When Jax had informed her that Gustus had taken Bellamy as his seken, as Indra had done with Octavia, a soft smile had spread across her face, pride swelling in her heart for her friends at how well they seemed to have assimilated. Wells often assisted in the clinic with Nyko, the healer having
garnered the Sky Boy's interest after having educated him on the various medicinal properties of plants, and Clarke was pleased to hear that Jax thought her former best friend to be a natural at the occupation - though not nearly as talented as she'd once been. To the blonde's utter delight, as well, Jax had many a story to tell about Raven's various escapades around Polis, mainly centered around the old scrap yard on the outskirts of the city, recalling one particularly humorous incident in which Anya had been forced to rescue the girl from atop a giant pile of shrapnel she'd climbed in search of a radiator part. He'd speculated to Clarke that the two women were most likely romantically involved, but he could never be sure, his encounters with them few and far between. Clarke simply smiled to herself, slightly smug with the fact that she'd been right after all... He talked fondly of Maya, the girl having taken over childcare for various working merchants in the city - currently taking care of his Isa -, and seemed to have formed a friendship with Thomas, a boy who seemed somewhat of a gentle giant in Jax's mind.

The moment he'd mentioned the Commander, though, Clarke had felt her heart physically plummet into her stomach, overcome by the sudden urge to vomit or run away - something, anything but the feelings that had overtaken her in that instant... Though he didn't say much beyond the fact that he'd only seen Lexa a handful of times since Clarke's memorial, the brunette having become somewhat of a recluse in the time spent outside of the throne room hearing complaints, Clarke could read between the lines... From what Clarke understood, Lexa was almost a completely different person, reduced to a hardened shell of her former self - unfeeling and unseeing - and Clarke couldn't take it.

She couldn't accept the fact that all of this was her fault - the fact that her friends still mourned for her, that she'd destroyed the one person she'd sworn never to harm... How could she?

Clarke simply couldn't take it, and she'd quickly asked Jax to change the subject, needing to get her mind out of the dark place it was spiraling towards - even more desolate than usual. He'd agreed immediately, expression alight with concern as he'd seemed to realize just how fragile Clarke's current mental state was. His concern had only seemed to make it worse, though...

When he'd felt well enough to travel, she'd sent him off with a simple message: Nia was dead, a new Queen had risen to power in her place, and that same Queen would answer the Commander's calls for a formal audience during the festival - nothing more, nothing less. She'd told him not to reveal her identity to anyone, citing her need to be able to handle the situation herself in person, knowing how much of a shock it would be - knowing how insane it would seem that she was even still alive, in the first place...

Jax had agreed easily enough, promising discretion and the delivery of the message as quickly as possible, and now it was almost time...

Time for Clarke to face her shadow, the one person who would remind her of the girl she once was - would always be, at the very core of her character. Time for her to own up to all the things she'd done, to all of the blood that pooled in the imprints of every footprint she left in the snow behind her now - to see the seemingly irreparable damage done to a soul that'd once been so pure, so innocent, one that was nothing but a charred and shriveled fragment of its former self... Would it even be able to recognize its other half, the part of itself that she'd discovered dancing through a forest of green that seemed to glow beneath an endless stretch of starlight? Would the jagged pieces be able to fit back into place?

Clarke couldn't even look at herself in the mirror most days, let alone look straight into the windows to her own soul reflected back at her... How was she supposed to do that knowing the things that
she'd done? How could she look into the eyes of one who'd so profoundly adored her at one point, who'd willingly placed her heart in the hands of one so reckless, so ephemeral, in the hopes of finding a new home while she still felt the weight of her broken promise? Clarke wasn't worthy of such comfort anymore - of such love. She was a monster, as grim as the very reaper of death, himself, and no amount of penance in the form of good deeds or re-written laws would ever change that.

Is this my new permanence?

Making her way down the small incline leading back into the main marketplace, Clarke slowed, lungs burning and heaving, breaths blossoming before her like fog. She hadn't quite been able to take a deep breath for days, kept just on the verge of comfort but never quite allowed to settle. She was uncomfortable, empty, and the more she thought about what lay ahead for her, the smaller that flicker of hope became...

A volatile, desolate existence. Surviving, once more...

"Ai kwin! Ai kwin!" A man's desperate shouts came to her suddenly, snapping Clarke out of her revery and causing her to whip around for the source.

A man not much older than Clarke was running towards her now, breathing heavily in a face paled by sheer panic. His messy hair stuck to his face with sweat, and Clarke immediately furrowed her brows at seeing his distress.

"Ai kwin, beja," he pleaded, coming to a stop in front of her, hands resting on his knees. Clarke recognized him, one of the many soldiers now at her disposal - one who'd been wholly enthusiastic to welcome her in as his new Queen. "My wife - she's...in labor..." He rasped in between breaths, looking up at Clarke with pure desperation coloring his features. "Healer...gone to...south village..."

"Show me the way, gona," Clarke responded immediately, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder as he straightened, eyes closing in relief for a moment before he took off in the direction he'd come.

They weaved through weathered ruins and small huts, all covered in a thin layering of snow and ice, the overcast sky casting everything in somewhat of a surreal bluish-grey tint. Clarke ran behind the man, easily keeping pace as he very nearly sprinted in the direction of his home. Clarke understood his anxiety, though - the frigid climate of Azgeda was hardly conducive to raising an infant, let alone designed to provide a safe space for intensive labor...

"Here, ai kwin." The warrior pointed to a smaller brick hut on the outskirts of the village, a dead meadow stretching far behind it.

The two of them entered at full speed, both having to skid to a stop as they very nearly tripped over the man's wife sprawled on a makeshift bed of furs on the floor. Clarke shot a wild glance at the man, immediately concerned as he simply shook his head.
"She could not get comfortable on the bed... I-I didn't know what else to do..."

Clarke was beginning to understand why Isabella had died in childbirth all those years ago... The Azgeda healers were pathetic at best, irresponsibly dangerous at worst. Add on the fact that the entire kingdom seemed to lack sanitary medical stations or proper knowledge of procedure, and the equation looked pretty gruesome. She mentally tacked on re-training their healers and building proper clinics in every village to the top of her never-ending to-do list as Queen...

Out of nowhere, the woman let out an ear-splitting scream, forcing Clarke's attention to her as the blonde took in every detail of the woman's exhausted frame. Immediately allowing her instincts to take over, Clarke knelt between the woman's legs, checking the progress of dilation and nearly gasping at the sight of the already-crowning head coming through.

"We can't move her anywhere now... I'm going to need sanitary blankets and warm water," Clarke told the man quickly, grabbing onto the woman's hand where it reached for her. "At the very least, the baby must be kept warm and clean..."

The man was frozen, kneeling beside his wife and staring down at her pained face as if about to go into shock.

"NOW, gona!!" Clarke shouted, every bit the Queen she was expected to be. The warrior immediately snapped back into consciousness at the command, moving into a flurry of action around his home as Clarke locked eyes with the woman, silently instructing her to synchronize her breathing with the blonde's.

"That's it," Clarke cooed, much softer now, ignoring the pain in her right hand as the woman held it in a vice lock. "You're doing so well... Just breathe... Breathe..."

What felt like only moments later, Clarke was bending forward to catch the baby in a large blanket the man had handed her, breathing an immense sigh of relief as gurgling cries pierced the air. She stared down at the child now cradled in her arms in complete and utter awe, tears welling in her eyes as she instructed the new father to find and sterilize a knife to cut the umbilical chord with.

Clarke began cleaning the baby with utmost gentleness, tears falling freely now as her heart warmed to an impossible degree. She was sure she'd never seen anything so small, so pure... so good...

"Congratulations, nomon... She's beautiful," Clarke rasped through a throat tightened by raw emotion, a wet smile stretching across her features as she placed the child gently in the waiting mother's arms, the woman staring at her child with something like amazement shining on her features.

The warrior returned immediately with a knife still steaming from fiery sterilization, and Clarke watched in somewhat of a trance as the man collapsed on his knees beside his wife, a gleeful sob ripping from his throat as the blonde showed him where to cut the chord. He then dropped the knife immediately, moving to nuzzle his head into his wife's hair, the pair overcome with blissful tears and soft chuckles as they stared at their creation. Clarke tried to be as discreet as possible as she quickly checked the child's vitals, wishing for the first time in many a moon to be back on the Ark - if only...
for the sole purpose of accessing the pristine medical equipment there...

As soon as the woman had delivered the placenta, Clarke quietly stepped outside of the hut to dispose of it, allowing them a moment as she leaned against the outside wall. She breathed deeply in and out, steadying herself as emotions surged powerfully within her...

Witnessing the birth of a child - a new life launched into the chaotic cycle of ups and downs to join the leagues of those much more wearied, much more worn... She realized then that that's where it was - the good left in the world, the stuff of dreams and happy memories. That's where it'd gone. Merged with the delicate fingers of infants reaching for their mothers, reflected back in the eyes of doting parents...

The look she'd seen in the parents' eyes - unguarded, uninhibited, all-encompassing love -, Clarke could've sworn she'd witnessed it somewhere before. A different kind of love, maybe, but one just as true, just as pure...

That look, reflected to a different degree in the eyes of new parents, was doing funny things to Clarke's heart, working its way inside and pushing against the icy walls, warmth blossoming from her chest cavity all the way down to her toes... The image of the child - so delicate, so beautiful - worked to merge with the feeling, thumping inside of Clarke's heart with a powerful rhythm.

Thawing, mending...

Perhaps this isn't permanence, after all...

At the sound of her title being called from within the hut, Clarke stepped back inside, nearly ablaze with warmth at the sight of the new family huddled together and positively glowing with the depth of their love. The new parents smiled up at their new Queen, shocking Clarke with the amount of reverence she saw there - far too much...

"Ai kwin, we can never thank you enough for what you've done for us," the warrior told Clarke, voice quiet and colored with the same reverence she'd seen in his gaze before. "We are forever indebted to you."

Clarke had to fight the urge to blush, shuffling her feet a little in a most uncharacteristic manner.

"I did nothing, really... No need to thank me, just - " Clarke gulped, feeling slightly shy all of a sudden. "Would you tell me what her name is? I think... Well, I think I'd like to know..."

The woman gave her Queen a fond smile before turning her attention back to her child, eyes shining with the purest form of love.

"Alexandria... Her name is Alexandria."
It was like a slap in the face, leaving Clarke in a stinging daze, stunned into silence for the first time in awhile. Of all the things she'd seen, heard, and felt in recent memory, this had to have come closest to what suffocation might cause within her lungs.

*The universe certainly was a cruel master, wasn't it?*

"It is a family name, *ai kwin,*" the man spoke up, brows furrowing a little as he took in his Queen's shell-shocked expression. "Passed down from generation to generation of women - "

"It...is a wonderful name," Clarke cut off the beginnings of his nervous ramblings, shuffling unsteadily to her feet as she did her best to control her expression, work herself back behind the mask of indifference she thought she'd perfected. "I...should leave you in peace... I will send my healer to consult with you as soon as I see him... Rest well."

With a gentle smile and a curt nod matched by her subjects, Clarke turned on her heels, all but bolting out of the small hut and back out into the frigid morning air.

It was almost refreshing the way the air assaulted her bare skin, razing painful bumps down the length of her arms and legs, reddening her cheeks with immediate windburn. She welcomed it, hungered for the way the air seemed to squeeze the inside of her chest cavity to an impossible degree - pleading for it not to stop...

Anything was better than this - this feeling, this shocking intrusion into a comfortable state of numbness and complacency. Not that it was comforting, per say - simply a protective barrier to the outside world that always sought to damage her so, her memories always on the verge of haunting her every waking moment whenever she allowed it to fall away...

*Her name is Alexandria...*

Clarke was running now - away from herself, away from her demons... *Away.*

Tomorrow would come, and there was nothing she could do about it now. She'd simply have to prepare her mind for the irreparable, the incomprehensible...

Skipping the stairs of the old ruins she occupied two at a time, Clarke rushed into her room and immediately slammed the door shut behind her, blocking out the sound of Echo's concerned calls to her from where the warrior had followed her into the building to attend to her Queen.

Sinking down onto the cold tiles of her bedroom floor with her back pressed against the door, Clarke's head fell into her hands, trembling against the inhuman sounds that seemed to escape her with every breath - sounds that seemed to rip from a place she hadn't accessed in what felt like a lifetime. Then, she did what she hadn't allowed herself to do in many months, far too cold and aloof in the confines of her mind to ever succumb to such weakness...
She cried.

"Remind me why I haven't killed you yet."

"You enjoy my wit and charm too much to see it wasted, I think," Roan drawled easily in response, throwing Clarke a cocky sideways grin from where he rode to her right, slowly canting his horse onward. "Besides, you wouldn't know what to do without me. You'd miss me too much."

"But think of the joy it would bring us all if you went ahead and put him out of his misery, ai kwin," Echo interjected from Clarke's other side, doing her best to contain the smile threatening to spread across her face. Clarke snorted, rolling her eyes at her companions as she allowed her body to sway slightly with her horse's movements.

It was strangely calming while simultaneously grounding, giving her anxiety an odd rhythm as they made their way toward Polis. They'd been riding for six days now, having taken short rests at night in between, hunting for game when they could and relying on the supplies they'd packed when there were no other prospects in sight. The journey was surprisingly easy, the threesome never having to worry about lingering Mountain Men or stray ripa, the carnivorous creatures having perished in the Mountain's collapse. They hadn't seen a single soul since they'd left the outer boundaries of Azgeda, and it was somewhat of an other-worldly type of serenity to be able to traipse across lush earth undisturbed by human touch for such an extended period of time.

Clarke was continually surprised by how pleasant of companions Roan and Echo could be - Roan, in particular, as she still wasn't quite sure what to make of the man, her mind caught somewhere between fascination and pure loathing for the person who'd somehow gotten her stuck in all of this. What had surprised her the most was the realization that she simply couldn't bring herself to hate him anymore, was wholly unable to access that part of herself she'd seemed to have solely reserved for his mother - a part of herself that she had no desire to re-surface or even think about in her current predicament...
Simply put, Clarke was a wreck.

On the outside, she'd managed to build a somewhat stable facade and keep it in place since the moment they'd left Azgeda in the hands of Clarke's favored and most-trusted general. It was somewhere between lofty indifference and steeled determination to see the festival through, and she was actually quite proud of herself that she'd been able to conceal Clarke so well beneath the usual mask of Azgeda's new Queen.

On the inside, though.... Inside, there was turmoil. A sort of screaming match between the mind of a warrior and newly-crowned Queen and the heart of a broken girl faced with the task of confronting the person who'd once given it purpose to beat - one telling her to quell her weaknesses and remain indifferent, un-phased, the other begging her to rush her horse on so that she may collapse at the mercy of the only person in this life who could truly destroy her... Her heart had settled into this terrible sort of retching on every beat, her pulse an aching sort of throb that very nearly set her teeth on edge. She couldn't quite get to that satisfying catch at the end of a breath that signalled her lungs to be satisfied, and it served to keep her right on the edge of dizziness and disorientation, simply adding to the brutal thumping within her chest. Her stomach churned with every clomp of the horse's hooves beneath her, and Clarke had never felt such a strong urge to get out of there, run in the opposite direction - anything to bring her back from the precipice of the massive collapse of her entire cognizance that was sure to occur once she stood before those eyes that haunted her so...

"It's even more obnoxious than I remembered it to be," Roan spoke up, snapping Clarke out of her inner turmoil as their horses came to a stop on a hill overlooking the all-too-familiar expanse of valley ahead of them.

Clarke's heart dropped into the pit of her stomach as she took in the sight of the Tower shooting far up into the sky before them, the rest of the capitol seeming to blossom out around the tall structure for miles. They had approached from the south side, aiming for discretion in their knowledge that Azgeda was never typically well-received into the main entrance of the city - or into any clan at all, really. They'd decided against a caravan of warriors and flags, agreeing that it would probably be best to humble themselves before the people of Polis with a small delegation and an unassuming presence - though, they all knew their new Queen's arrival would likely cause a stir for a slew of other reasons.

Clarke had been wearing her cloak for the entirety of the journey, her face completely hidden beneath the large hood covering it. Though she knew it was slightly overkill, the anonymity of it all had brought her a strange amount of comfort somehow - possibly knowing that it would be the last time she'd ever experience it again within the proximity of Polis...

"I, for one, would like to be welcomed into this city without either being tied up and dragged through it or having to climb a back fence to avoid being spat on," Roan continued drily, canting his horse back into action as the three of them slowly made their way down the hill, the sun setting beautifully across the expanse of sky before them. "But, perhaps that's just a personal preference..."

"We have your mother to thank for the lovely reception, my prince," Echo quipped back, quirking her brow at Roan as the man snorted, shrugging his shoulders with a crooked smile stretching across
his face. They both seemed to be in good spirits, having spoken extensively about the amount of wine they planned to consume during the festival and talking animatedly about the prospect of sparring with some of the Commander's guards. They'd somehow avoided discussing the most important detail of the whole ordeal, though, seemingly determined to talk about anything but the unveiling of their new Queen at the festival's head...

Clarke, on the other hand... Clarke couldn't breathe. Every time she tried, the air rattled usually in her chest cavity, never quite making it to where she needed it most. Her blood was running much colder than usual now, causing her entire frame to set on the verge of trembling as she gripped the reins in white-knuckled fists. A swarm of emotions warred with the rising panic prickling at the back of her neck, eating away at her consciousness, seemingly defined by a single question now...

Will she even see me?

They brought their horses to a stop just before the tall back gate, Roan dismounting first to greet the guards standing outside of the door. Despite the fact that she feared her legs collapsing upon impact with the ground, Clarke managed a graceful dismount, keeping her hood in place the entire time as Echo moved around to take her horse's reins from her. At the sight of her Queen's face now paled and stricken-looking all of a sudden, though, Echo stopped, brows furrowing as she placed a comforting hand on Clarke's shoulder, coaxing the blonde to look at her.

"Do not be afraid, Klark," she spoke softly, gently, keeping her voice at a volume only to be heard by Clarke's ears, alone. "The clans have despised Nia since the moment she rose to power, and she's caused them nothing but grief since then... You will be welcomed into the Coalition like a hero, ai kwin, no matter what it took to get you here... The Commander will be honored by your presence."

Oh, you have no idea...

Though being warmly-welcomed into the Coalition wasn't exactly at the top of Clarke's priorities at the moment, she found that the words still brought her a small comfort, coaxing gently at the ragged edges of her spiraling consciousness for a few odd seconds. As soon as it faded, though, Clarke was left trying to recover the pieces of the fallen facade she'd somehow let crumble, ducking her head at the curious stares of the guards and moving to fall into place between Roan and Echo as they walked through the gate.

Polis was exactly how she'd remembered it, dreamt it, the sounds of bustling life echoing through the air to the more quiet part of the city they currently walked through. The shops were the same, nestled between ruins and homes of city-dwellers, a filter of warmth seemingly settled over every building, seeping into the air to speak of color and life unlike that of any other place on Earth. It was amazing how quickly the city had become home to Clarke, how easy it was for the blonde to find that same place within her heart once more - though, a place now hollowed out and jagged around the edges, as it were...

Clarke could feel eyes on her from every direction, sense the attention directed to her back and profile as the few onlookers in this part of the city tried to steal a glance at the elusive new Azplana so wholly unknown to everyone but her subjects - the entire kingdom of Azgeda seemingly having taken a vow of secrecy to protect their Queen against prying eyes and listening ears... The Tower loomed ever-intimidatingly ahead of them still, much closer now, and Clarke's heart had nearly taken
off into another realm completely as her teeth began to chatter a little bit. Her body was having some sort of full-scale physiological reaction to the environment, the aching throb that matched every heartbeat now reverberating throughout her entire body.

She couldn't do this. How could she possibly do this? She had to present herself to the Commander in front of the throne room full of clan leaders and advisors, and how was she supposed to do that without falling apart? How was she supposed to appear before Lexa like a ghost out of the girl's waking nightmare, covered in scars with eyes as dead as the corpses slain by her own hand, and have hope?

More importantly, how was she supposed to subject Lexa to her presence before a crowd of onlookers knowing that the girl's reaction may threaten everything she'd ever built for herself as Commander?

Clarke kept her head down, eyes focused on the cobblestone path before her, afraid that she might stumble over her own feet if she lost sight of the ground for even the shortest of seconds. Every part of her hurt, ever fiber of her being screamed with dread, and she didn't know how she was going to do this...

She couldn't do this to Lexa, could she? She couldn't make a scene like this... She was the only one who knew -

"Echo and I will go in first and announce our new Queen, as is customary for advisors to do during the opening reception of the festival should new leaders be presented," Roan informed her softly, the three of them approaching the back door of the Tower with a couple of guards in tow. Clarke couldn't speak, couldn't think, could only hope that her limbs would continue to cooperate with her, struggling through thick and murky water as they were.

The guard standing outside of the door opened it for the three Azgeda warriors as they approached, Clarke mechanically falling into step between Roan and Echo as they entered the lower dark corridor of the Tower. Clarke's breaths were coming out short and stunted, her chest heaving desperately on behalf of lungs so deprived now, and she didn't think she could do this...

What if she doesn't see me anymore?

The three of them walked down the corridor lit by torches at precise intervals, Clarke's hood concealing her face completely to the curious eyes of the Commander's personal staff as they passed, making their way towards the elevator that stood wide open, waiting for them... Clarke could only see what was directly in front of her feet, her vision trained solely on the ground, her posture verging on concaving as she fought with everything she had to remain conscious.

The moment they stepped into the elevator, Clarke felt a gentle hand on her shoulder once more. She couldn't look up, though, couldn't move from where she was now leaning against the elevator wall, head drooping impossibly lower - shriveling away both physically and mentally before the eyes of all those who chose to truly look at her...

"Do what you please until we call you in," Echo whispered somewhere close to Clarke's ear,
everything sounding and feeling as if a metal cage was infringing on the very space around them now, squeezing. "You'll know when it's time."

Clarke exhaled slowly, closing her eyes as her blood roared relentlessly in her eyes, her heart jolting harshly in her chest as the elevator doors closed and the metal box jerked itself to life, slowly ascending...

What if it's never time?

It was exactly the same.

Clarke's room, the place that'd become her physical home for her time in Polis, was nearly identical to how she'd left it - everything from the location of the record player on the shelf against the left wall to the stack of books on the bedside table...

All the same but still so painfully different...

She'd stolen away to her old room as soon as Roan and Echo had entered the throne room, unable to stay still outside of the door and simply wait for her existence to fall to shambles... So, she'd retreated, nearly running out of the hallway filled with guards whom she'd known were staring pointedly at her the entire time, scrambling down the staircase to find refuge in a place that used to bring her so much comfort...

Clarke walked further into the room as if in a trance now, approaching the small nightstand with tears welling in her eyes as she ran her fingers over the cover of the top book, touch as light as a feather as the pad of her pointer finger came away with a thick layer of dust sticking to it. Though Clarke's memories of a happier time were hazier now, blurred and disfigured by a mind at its own mercy, she recognized the title immediately - the collection of children's stories she'd been reading to Belou and Zenya every night before bed, the same book she'd read a passage from in Lexa's arms, voice nothing but a soft whisper, taking advantage of the short moment of reprieve the night they'd -

Clarke turned away, gulping against the memory that wore away at her so, allowing her eyes to scan over the room now bathed in the last wisps of evening sunlight, shadows cast about and thrown across every dusty surface like she might've drawn them in her sketchpad at one point. In the shadows now tugging at the very corners of her mind, prodding hidden memories from a cage usually so secured, Clarke swore she could almost see the footprints left behind on the floor from where she and Lexa had danced all those nights, crafting their own universe out of stars captured in the depths of eyes twinkling in tandem, souls merging...

It was only in that moment, as Clarke had turned around to face the bed once more, that she'd noticed for the first time the way the sheets were so disheveled, pillows out of place and furs rumpled as if
kicked in the fit of a restless nights' sleep - as if someone had been sleeping there only the night before... Heart now lodged in her throat and beating against the tight constriction there, Clarke gently reached down to peel back the sheet settled in a strange shape on the edge of the bed, almost rectangular -

A guttural sob ripped from her chest, her hand moving to clap over her mouth as she stumbled back, mind pulsing as if in a fever pitch at what she saw...

Her sketchpad, open to the portrait Clarke had drawn of hers and Lexa's interlocking fingers, a study of lines and shadows woven together to encapsulate the one true measure of perfection Clarke had ever been able to craft within her mind. It was there in black and white, real and permanent, and it was then that Clarke knew...

Collapsing to her knees, chest heaving against hyperventilating sobs refusing to be set free, Clarke felt everything all at once; every lost moment, every second that had been taken from them - every memory that could've been made with fingers intertwined, a forest of green reflected in depths of oceans blue, soft skin as welcoming as the only home she'd ever truly been able to feel -

Like leaving home one day with every intention of returning, only to find your memories of its location suddenly gone from you, the details of its exterior blurred and unintelligible - left with that all-encompassing need to return home in order to survive but not knowing how... Like watching the person you were holding with one hand over the dark depths of an endless precipice - trying with all of your might not to let slip but somehow knowing you couldn't hold for much longer - fall away from you and into the abyss, leaving you with the knowledge that if you'd only used two hands, you might've been able to hang on to them...

Like a girl sleeping in the bed of her lover long-gone, trying with everything she had to merge her imprint into that of the one left behind, clinging onto fleeting images only to be seen in the blinks of closed eyes for the rest of eternity...

Clarke knew, and it hurt - like nothing she'd ever known, nothing she'd ever thought possible. Nothing any bell or sword could do - nothing short of running her straight through - could ever compare to this agony, this anguish...

*How can she possibly see me? How could I ever ask her to do such a thing?*

*As long as you stay with me... Never leave me... I'll always be with you...*

*I went where you could not follow, and I am so sorry...*

*I love you...*
Those three words, as large and profound as the loudest of shouts, echoing harshly through the silence that sought to render her helpless now... That was it. That was what she needed. That was all she would ever need...

_I have to make her see me._

A sudden burst of energy coursed through her, and - invigorated by those three simple words -, Clarke rose to her feet, swaying slightly at her full height before shaking herself out of it, turning on her heels and nearly running into the bathroom. She'd somehow let the hood fall away in her moment of weakness, revealing her distraught features pulled tight with agony, but that was no matter now... She fixed her hair into place, tucking stray strands back into the two braids that wound around the crown of her head and flattening any wild pieces flying from the remaining waves that cascaded over her shoulders. She secured her cloak over her typical uniform of black, wiping at her slightly-reddened eyes now glistening with purpose and determination over closed window. She squared her shoulders back, every bit the regal Queen she needed to be, expression settling into a mask of newly-found purpose, re-discovered willpower.

Moving to secure her hood back into place, Clarke turned away from the mirror, striding out of the bathroom and through her room towards the doors. Once on the other side, her pace only picked up, determined to get to the throne room on the back of this burst of energy - determined not to fall again.

Her heart was pounding now, racing even beyond the rhythm of her quickened steps as she climbed the staircase two at a time, the scenery blurring around her now as her head swam...

_She could do this. She _would_ do this..._  

_I will make her see me._

Clarke could barely process anything as she suddenly stepped out into the hallway leading to the throne room, everything happening far too quickly, her steps now echoing in her own ears as she made her way in between two lines of guards standing opposite each other against the walls. She didn't allow the curious murmurs to deter her as she made her way to the throne room doors.

Coming to an abrupt stop right in front of them, Clarke squared her shoulders, keeping her head slightly drooped with the hood still concealing her as she clenched her hands into white-knuckled fists at her side. She gave herself over completely to the soldier now rearing its head inside, determined to treat this like any other mission - determined to look past her emotions in this impossible moment and be _seen_...

Voices suddenly drifted to her through the door where she waited, captivating her and rendering her momentarily awe-struck as she recognized the sweetest sound in the world - her favorite voice, the thing she'd thought she'd never have the privilege of hearing again. Despite herself, Clarke broke into a blinding smile that seemed to rise from the very depths of her core, breaking through the soldier's facade she'd secured into place beneath her hood - allowing herself to bask in the warmth of that small home for just a moment...
"You mean to tell me that Nia took a *seken* without my knowledge, trained this girl in her own image whilst concealing her identity from the Coalition, and then wound up *murdered* by that very same weapon she'd hoped to use against me?!" Lexa roared furiously, her voice inflamed by pure hatred and a frigidness the blonde had never heard before. Clarke's smile slowly faltered, her breaths beginning to shorten once more as she felt her energy wavering.

*No, wait a minute... That can't be right... That can't be my favorite voice.*

*It sounds so wrong...*

"When Jax returned to me with your new Queen's message, I held off, allowing you to make your way to Polis in your own time in the hopes of rectification, but now..." Lexa's voice had grown quieter, almost fatally so, steeled beyond a point Clarke would've thought possible for a girl so soft beneath her fingertips, so pure...

Why did she sound like that? Why was every word so *empty*? So *wrong*?

"Knowing that she kept such an important detail from me - that I have been lied to once again after *months* of deception and diversion - I would like one good reason not to remove Azgeda from the Coalition completely - not to *cut you down* where you stand! *GIVE ME A REASON, GONA!*"

*No, no, no, no, no.... This can't be right. This is so wrong. How can it all be so wrong?*

*You must give her reason.*

Blood roaring in her ears, heart thundering on in her chest like a hammer pounding against her ribcage, Clarke stepped forward, gesturing for the guards to open the door to the throne room. This was her unspoken cue, her hidden moment... She would not allow Roan and Echo to worsen it for her any further.

This was Clarke's moment now, and she was ready to take it...

Upon the creaking sound of the heavy doors being pushed open, Clarke heard the collective swish of cloaks and garb as all heads seemed to whip in her direction, hungering to get a glance at the infamous new *Azplana* now purposefully striding down the central aisle towards the steps to their *Heda's* throne.

Ignoring the deafening rush of blood in her ears, the tilting of the world threatening to throw itself off its axis, the protests from her soul as it sought to hide itself away, Clarke came to a stop in between Roan and Echo. Both warriors immediately stepped back to flank their Queen, their relief at her timing plainly obvious despite the fact that Clarke still couldn't see their faces from beneath her cloak...

She could *feel* every pair of eyes in the room searing into her frame now, the silence that'd instantly befallen the room upon her entrance now screaming maniacally in her ears... She took a deep breath,
feeling the weight of a moment certain to alter the course of the empty life she'd forged now pressing down on her shoulders, certain her pounding heartbeat could be heard in the tense quiet as it threatened to fly away...

*Make her see you.*

Uncurling her fingers from the fists that surely would've broken her bones had she kept them that way for much longer, she reached up, doing everything she could to fight against the thickness of the air that sought to strangle her as she grabbed onto the edges of her cloak...

Time came to a screeching halt, detaching itself from the grander scheme of the universe and re-molding itself to nothing more than a subordinate of what was about to unfold in the throne room...

Clarke pulled back her hood.
I Need You Here with Me

Chapter Notes

The amount of times I was called a sadist in the comments of the last chapter had me LIVING y'all. You guys are fuckin great man. What can I say? I'm just a messy bitch who loves drama (and cliffhangers).

This chapter....is what I'd like to call a tour de force/feels. It was hard to write, but extremely cathartic in a lot of ways, as well. Clarke is at war with her own mind, so hopefully that comes across well.

I normally write to the tune of movie/TV scores, and this one was written to "Goodbye Brother" from the Game of Thrones S1 OST. If you're the kinda person that enjoys listening to music while reading, it sets the tone suuuuper well, I think...

Anyways, good luck with this bohemoth. It is only the beginning...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There are moments in life that define the course of what happens to a person, be they good or bad...

That spark of attraction upon first glimpsing someone and the subsequent thoughts and actions that follow; do you approach them? Could they be the one? What would your life look like if you simply never see them again, don't take that chance?

The birth of a child - the epitome of human creation and the heralded pinnacle of biology in many ways - and the re-arranging of one's life around the well-being of that child; what sacrifices will you choose to make for them throughout the course of your life as a parent? What values will you raise them adhering to? How will you respond to loving someone in such an entirely different way than you could ever love anyone else?

The death of a family member, close friend, or lover and how you respond; do you shut down, give up? Do you allow it to alter to way you function in your day-to-day life? How are you supposed to go on living your life knowing that the very foundation of it all now has to accommodate the gaping hole left behind, with only the memories you have left to show for it?

Those moments - and many more to varying degrees of impact - shape a person into the final product they are able to reflect upon in their final days as being the complete and holistic versions of their character.
This was one of those moments...

The instant that Clarke pulled back her hood, let it drop down as she brought her head up from where it was bent slightly forward, there was a collective gasp that seemed to echo through the tense silence of the room like a deafening screech in the blonde's ears. Time was still an elusive thing, a construct of human nature seemingly unable to find its rhythm still, and Clarke nearly felt the jerk and pull of the universe's cogs as it attempted to right itself.

The seconds following Clarke's reveal didn't seem to be helping anything, either...

For, the moment Clarke had lifted her head to gaze straight ahead, she saw her.

Lexa was there, standing before her throne a couple of steps up from Clarke, adorned in the full garb of the Commander with a face devoid of war paint - even more devastatingly beautiful than Clarke had remembered her, dreamt her. Hair cascading almost artfully over her shoulders, interwoven with her usual braids, sun-kissed skin nearly glowing before the blonde's eyes, glorious full lips as inviting as the sweetest glimpse of home - the lines and structure of her face something crafted by the most talented of artists, out-shining even that of the most lauded of ancient temples now long-gone.

*My Lexa.*

Clarke's body was doing strange things all of a sudden, the wheels previously turning at a startling rate in her mind having come to a screeching halt, her lungs having ceased their capacity to cycle air through. Her heart had lurched so hard within her chest that Clarke was surprised she hadn't been forced to her knees by the impact it'd made against her ribcage, fluttering in her chest as frantically as the wings of a baby bird having been forced from its nest by its mother for the first time. Her feet felt legitimately fused to the floor beneath her, her knees nearly trembling as her body was caught at the very peak of an adrenaline rush resembling something like an off-shoot of fight or flight - the only comparable sensation to what was happening within her body now.

Only, Clarke had no desire to fight, and her body wouldn't allow her to take off running, so she just had to stand there, at the mercy of her internal compass as her consciousness fought with everything it had not to just implode on itself, stunned.

When her mind was finally able to disentangle itself enough to lock onto Lexa's eyes, though - the only place she'd ever truly found a home in -, Clarke felt something physically crack inside of her, the feeling mimicking something like the impact of a snapping rib forced into a lung...

There was nothing there - no spark of light or recognition, no indication that Lexa was even *seeing* her at all... Nothing.

As if someone had reached in and turned off a switch behind the girl's eyes, extinguishing the crucial part of a human being that gives them vitality, encourages others to engage and *connect* with them. The part that used to whisper secrets to Clarke in screaming silence, full of a depth and kindness the blonde had never known before, so vastly different than the hardened exterior housing it. The part that'd given Clarke refuge when she simply hadn't been able to stand being alone with her own thoughts, never having to ask whether or not she needed the comfort, always just *knowing*...
The one certainty Clarke had ever felt in her life, the knowledge that she'd always be able to find solace there - that her soul would always be able to find comfort in the company of its mate, attached by a tether to push as the other pulled, to bask in the warmth provided... That was gone.

Her home was gone.

It was gone, and Clarke couldn't breathe.

*How am I supposed to live without it?*

With a jolt nearly physically-felt, time restarted, snapping Clarke out of the infinite moment now captured within the confines of the finite once more. Forcing her eyes away from Lexa's, unable to bear it anymore as she felt her soul quite literally clawing at itself from the inside, Clarke looked to the figure to the Commander's left, doing her best to hide what must've been a visceral flash of raw emotion that'd crossed her face the moment before...

"Clarke?" The uncertain catch in Anya's voice hit the blonde straight in the chest, forcing the air even harder out of her already-punctured lungs.

The warrior's face had paled significantly upon Clarke's reveal, mouth agape as her eyes frantically scanned the blonde's face, searching for something, *anything* that could explain what she was seeing - every emotion flashing through the woman's eyes signaling to Clarke that she'd lost the capacity to comprehend and process. Anya had stepped slightly forward now, posture rigid as if she didn't know whether or not to run forward and throw her arms around the blonde or back up into the curtains behind the Commander's throne in sheer horror and confusion.

Clarke wouldn't allow herself to look at Lexa, didn't think she could handle her soul legitimately being torn to shreds in that way, the girl still completely frozen before her throne as she stared down at Clarke - unseeing, unfeeling, uncomprehending...

Clarke closed her eyes for a moment, swallowing against the blockage in her throat as she fought to slow the excruciating rate of her heart. Everything *hurt*...

Opening her eyes slowly, Clarke focused all of her attention on Anya, refusing to allow her wounds to tear any further.

"Hello, Anya," Clarke greeted the woman softly, her voice as gentle as she could manage in a throat so agonizingly tightened. "It's good to see you again."

Surprising everyone in the room, Indra suddenly came forward from Lexa's other side, hastily drawing her sword and moving to stand before Clarke, the tip of the blade nearly pressing against the skin of the blonde's throat. Her eyes were wild, scanning the blonde's face with pure confusion and something close to *desperation* lighting her features, mouth working anxiously.

"What is the meaning of this?!" she seethed through gritted teeth, her hand slightly trembling where
she held the blade to Clarke's throat.

The blonde barely registered the sound of swords being drawn beside her, both Echo and Roan now pointing their weapons towards Indra, bodies tensed as if prepared to strike the warrior to protect their Queen.

Lexa just stood there...

"Indra!!" Anya shouted, rushing forward to stand beside the other warrior, arms extended as if desiring to pull the woman back, eyes widened with panic as they flitted between Clarke and the point of the blade. "What on earth are you - ?!"

"This is a trick!! She is an imposter!!" Indra yelled back, voice nearly cracking as her eyes darted between Clarke's, her grip tightening on the sword as if consciously willing her hand to cease its trembling. "Another one of Nia's games - one of her tricks to get to Heda - "

"Are you out of your mind?!!" Roan roared incredulously, stepping even closer to Indra as Echo mirrored him. "Do you really think I would lie about my own mother's be-heading?!!"

The collective sound of swords being drawn throughout the throne room was deafening in the silence now thick with tension and impossible confusion. Gustus was standing on Indra's other side now, more emotion obvious on his face than Clarke had ever seen before, sword now directed at Roan's chest.

Clarke still couldn't look at Lexa, couldn't bear the fact that the girl was just standing there...

Time slowed again - though, not completely stopping this time -, shifting to re-align itself with the wheels in Clarke's mind that'd once again begun to turn... Every instinct she'd been taught to feel screamed at her to disarm the warrior before her, break her arm in the process of spinning her around so that she could more easily slit her throat -

No.

That's not the person you are... That's not the person you need to make her see...

No, she would not even make a move to her weapon. She wouldn't even flinch... This moment was too crucial, too defining. This was her chance to show the leaders of the Coalition who the new Azplana really was - the kind of ruler she intended to be.

This was her time to be seen.

Leveling her gaze to match Indra's piercing eyes still searing into her, Clarke allowed the mask she'd created to fall completely into place, her expression showing no hint of the rapid decaying of her soul currently taking place in the depths of her core. She stood un-phased, unmoved, not allowing a single emotion to flit through her eyes as she stared at the warrior before her.
"I understand why you all must be confused. This certainly must come as a shock... And, might I say - the stories of my death were far more heroic than what actually happened, but I'm flattered all the same." Clarke's voice was just as soft as before, the blonde immensely proud of herself for how even it sounded coming from lips she had to so actively fight to keep from trembling.

"I'm not an imposter, nor am I a weapon to be used by anyone against anyone else. Not anymore... All you need to know now is that Nia is dead - killed by my blade - and I have risen to power in her place. I am here on behalf of Azgeda to offer our support to the Commander's Coalition, to celebrate its formation with all of you, and to bring reassurance of our future cooperation with the laws that Nia so frequently defied... I want peace - nothing more, nothing less."

So much more...

Indra's eyes rapidly scanned Clarke's face, searching for any hint of a lie as Anya put her hand on the woman's outstretched arm, silently imploring the warrior to lower her weapon. Though Clarke couldn't afford to direct her attention away from Indra so incredibly agitated before her, she knew the rest of the leaders still had their weapons drawn, the sensation of a collective breath being held as everyone in the room seemed to be waiting for the other shoe to drop in the heavy silence.

Lexa still hadn't moved...

After another ridiculously lengthy moment, Indra finally pulled the sword back from Clarke's throat, lowering her weapon slowly as everyone in the room seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. Clarke barely spared a thought to rejoice as both Roan and Echo gradually lowered their weapons, as well, allowing everyone around her the space to process as she continued to stand still, waiting... Looking almost pained now, Indra stepped back, her eyes still glued to Clarke's face as she still struggled to understand, to process.

Clarke let her do it, keeping her steady gaze on Indra's face and standing completely still, maintaining her composure as the three warriors now standing before her sized her up - looking her up and down as if searching for a fallacy, a fraud...

Why is she so still?

Suddenly, Anya moved to stand right in front of Clarke, angling her body as if purposefully shielding the blonde from the person behind her... Anya stood just a breath away from Clarke, eyes rapidly scouring every inch of the blonde's face, breaths coming out harsh and stunted - much like Clarke's own had been before she'd entered the throne room. The look on her face - as if she still didn't believe what she was seeing, as if the girl standing before her couldn't possibly be the same Clarke she'd once known... It was devastating.

"Clarke ... Is it you? Is it - ?" The warrior swallowed harshly, her voice nothing more than a hoarse whisper, only to be heard by Clarke's ears alone. "Is it really you, skai prisa?"

Her old nickname on Anya's lips had Clarke choking back a sob, closing her eyes for a moment as unwanted emotion threatened to break through her careful facade.

She can't see me... None of them can see me...
Suddenly, a brutal yell ripped through the all-encompassing quiet of the room, causing the blonde's eyes to snap open as a number of the clan leaders and advisors behind her sucked in sharp breaths. Clarke immediately whipped around, eyes scanning the faces of her fellow leaders as they appeared to search about the room for the source of the sound.

"Down with Azgeda!!" a man's voice roared, the dissenter breaking through the startled crowd with a murderous look on his face, adorned in the uniform of the Blue Cliff Nation. "Death to Heda!!"

Before anyone even had the chance to react, the man was rushing forward, sword drawn and charging towards Clarke with a piercing war cry ripping through the air.

Clarke didn't even have to think about it.

Without even processing what she was doing, Clarke was running to meet the man, ducking beneath the careless swing of his sword as he attempted to swipe at her, using her downward momentum to kick out and swipe his legs out from beneath him. The man went down hard onto his side, immediately gasping for breath, and Clarke used to opportunity to kick him forcefully in the ribs with the steel toe of her boot, satisfied with the crack she heard as he was forced onto his back.

Once he was left spluttering face-up on the floor of the throne room, Clarke brought her leg over and down onto the hand holding his sword, crushing most of the bones there and dislodging the sword from his grip. She unceremoniously kicked the weapon away, bending forward to grip him by the collar of his shirt with one hand and bring him nose-to-nose with her.

Clarke grit her teeth at him, fury pulsing through her veins as she stared into the eyes of the disoriented man now lighting with terror beneath her searing gaze.

"You will not touch the Commander - do you understand me?!" she growled menacingly, loud enough for it to echo through the throne room having fallen silent once more with anticipation. "Yu gonneplei ste odon."

With one swift movement of her free hand, Clarke removed the dagger from the holster on her arm holding the man close to her face, flipping it out of its sheath and catching it in her hand, slashing it across the man's throat in one masterful swish of her blade. Blood immediately splattered in her face and Clarke hissed in disgust, dropping the man's corpse onto the floor and moving to swipe the back of her hand across her face, unintentionally smearing his blood down her cheek.

Adrenaline continued to pound in her veins, the room still vibrating red as she stared down at the corpse in disgust, nose wrinkled.

How dare he?

No one will hurt her... No matter who I am to her now, I will kill anyone if they so much as try...

I have hurt her.
This is not who she was supposed to see...

Clarke's blood ran cold in her veins, the adrenaline immediately dying out as she looked down at the blade in her left hand, covered in the dark red blood that stained her hand, as well.

What have I done?

Clarke looked up, eyes darting wildly from face to face of those who watched her silently now, some expressions aghast as others began to look impressed... She whipped around on her heels, eyes first falling on Roan and Echo, both warriors' eyes widened with surprise - though Roan's expression was growing more and more smug by the second... Indra and Gustus looked bewildered, eyes darting between Clarke and the corpse as if they couldn't believe what they'd just witnessed. Anya was shell-shocked, pale and frozen as she stared at Clarke in utter confusion. And Lexa -

Lexa was now standing in between Anya and Indra, having apparently come down the steps in the process of Clarke's... outburst.

The look in her eyes... Oh, god, Clarke would rather be legitimately set aflame than have to see it - the feeling coming close to what she believed burning alive might actually feel like... Empty, uncomprehending, unseeing - no sign of even having registered that it was Clarke who'd just slain a warrior in her throne room.

She can't see me... Why can't she see me?

You're not her Clarke anymore.

Clarke couldn't handle that.

Shaking her head a little bit as her eyes darted between the faces of those who now looked at her so differently, so wrongly, Clarke turned on her heels, hastily stepping over the man's body and hurrying back down the aisle of the throne room at a near-run. Once again, she felt the sting of every pair of eyes searing into her back as she retreated towards the door, and she all-but-sprinted out of the room as tears began to prickle unbidden at her eyes. She bolted down the hallway, ignoring the questioning murmurs of the guards posted against the wall as she passed, some clearly alarmed by the bloody blade still held in her left hand, and she couldn't take it...

Tears were streaming freely down her face as she made her way into the empty stairwell, running down the stairs at a dangerous pace, uncaring.

Her soul was in shreds, her heart reduced to a pile of ash beneath the brittle bones of her ribcage, and Clarke couldn't take it...

You are nothing but a monster to her now.
The blood wouldn't come off.

No matter how hard Clarke scrubbed at the skin of her hand, the apple of her cheek, they came away red. Even though she could see that her skin was clean, her mind's eye had tinged every exposed part of her red, and she hated it.

Clarke hated herself...

She was sitting on her old bedroom floor on the place they used to dance, legs curled up to her chest, staring blankly ahead of her as the sound of Polis nightlife drifted up to her through the window. It was too familiar, too welcoming, and everything was wrong. She couldn't tell how much time had passed since she'd bolted from the throne room, only knowing that time was a cruel accomplice to her misery now...

Why had she done it? Why had she made a scene in such a way, done the exact opposite of what she'd told herself she was going to do? Why hadn't she just approached Lexa in private before the ceremony - left Azgeda a day earlier so that she could do so -, given the girl a warning, time to process, anything? What was wrong with her?!

Her mind was swimming with could've's, should've's, and would've's, and Clarke felt empty. Never before in her life had she felt so reduced to nothing, so completely withered away by a single look... Lexa hadn't even seemed to recognize her, didn't respond to her presence in any way, shape, or form - as if Clarke hadn't even been there at all. There hadn't been a single flash beneath her eyes, either, any indicator that there was actually still a living being housed deep within, and Clarke didn't believe anything had ever been more painful...

Did I do that? Is it my fault? It has to be my fault...

I broke a promise. I hurt her... I never wanted to hurt her...
Clarke barely registered the sound of her bedroom doors opening, of a figure gasping and rushing over to kneel before her, taking her face in their hands as she stared blankly ahead - as unseeing as the very keeper of her heart...

"Klark?" Anya's gentle voice called to her, coaxing, pleading, the warrior's face swimming in and out of focus before Clarke's eyes. Her grip tightened on the sides of Clarke's face when she got no response, her eyes glistening with concern as she attempted to rouse the blonde from her waking nightmare.

"Klark, beja ... Look at me. You are alright, no one is going to harm you now... You are safe."

I am never safe... I lost my home.

"Listen to me, skai prisa ... Everything is alright, everything is going to be alright... None of the Coalition leaders have claimed the dissenter - not Blue Cliff nor anyone else... He was an anarchist, disguised as an advisor to get into the gathering of leaders. You did no wrong in defending yourself - or your Heda, for that matter -, and the Coalition is still in tact. The clan leaders are actually quite impressed with you, if I'm being honest... You're alright, goufa, just breathe..."

Despite herself, despite the loss of the very foundation on which she'd hoped to stand, Clarke found that the news lightened the grip locked and squeezing her lungs ever-so-forcefully, allowing at least a little oxygen to get through. So, she hadn't ruined everything ... Her kingdom was still secure - for now -, and she'd at least have something to go back to that would keep her busy. Something that would keep her in survival mode for a little bit longer...

Not too much longer...

Anya's grip was unwavering, unrelenting, and Clarke finally met the warrior's gaze, her own eyes devoid of anything, empty pools reflecting a profound kind of concern. Clarke still couldn't seem to move...

"Wh-what happened a-after I left?" Clarke rasped, her voice gravelly and scraped raw, never having sounded so unlike herself before. "Wh-where is everyone else? Raven, Wells, Octav - ?"

"Do not worry about them, skai prisa - they're all safe," Anya promised her, her eyes softening ever-so-slightly as she appraised Clarke now - still searching for any signs of an illusion. "They're all in the marketplace helping with final preparations... They will be so happy to see you, Clarke - you have no idea..."

What if they can't see me, either? Will I be able to survive that? I don't know if I can...

But, you're in survival mode now, remember? It is what you're designed to do... Nothing more, nothing less...

"As for the opening ceremony - I adjourned it... There was no need for everyone to just stand there staring at each other... Besides, there was a body to dispose of, and I'm sure they were anxious to find their delegations to spread the news, anyways... Your advisors have been instructed to wait for you in the marketplace, to give you a moment to yourself..."
Anya trailed off, fighting against obvious discomfort now as Clarke remained wholly unresponsive in her grasp. Everything was so wrong, so terribly wrong - so painful... As gently as the brush of a feather, Anya stroked her thumb across Clarke's cheek, brows furrowing as she met the blonde's gaze now - her expression speaking of one trying to soothe a fragile being, a wounded creature, one that she wasn't sure she even believed in yet...

"All this time...," Anya whispered almost reverently now, her eyes darting between both of Clarke's and roaming across the blonde's face - as if attempting to trigger some form of active memory, something that could force her into believing what she was seeing...

"You've been alive all this time, and we didn't even - " Anya gulped, choking against an uncharacteristic level of emotion as she closed her eyes for a moment, doing her best to hide it from the blonde's gaze - not like Clarke would've been able to process it, anyways. "We didn't even know you'd survived the fall of the Maun-de, let alone the fact that you'd been captured again, I..."

Tears were streaming down Anya's face from beneath closed eyelids, the warrior allowing streams to fall down her face for perhaps the first time in months. Clarke couldn't breathe, couldn't think...

I've brought them so much pain... How could I bring them so much pain?

I've lost my home...

"I don't know if I did," Clarke whispered, the words strangled and catching at the claw marks inside of her throat. Anya's eyes snapped open, regarding Clarke with even more confusion shining through wetness now. It was Clarke's turn to close her eyes this time, her turn to hide what she didn't want to be found.

I don't think I want to be seen anymore... I don't think I can be...

"I don't know if I survived it."

There it was. Her soul's last confession, laid bare on the table to be scrutinized and picked apart. Her greatest fear... What if she really didn't survive it? What if Clarke had actually perished?

You are not her Clarke anymore...

Before Anya could even hope to formulate a response, the sound of Clarke's bedroom doors bursting open and slamming against the walls stopped her short, forcing the blonde's eyes open once more as both she and Anya whipped around to look for the source of the sound.

Every last wisp of oxygen was ripped from her lungs by the very claws unfurling from her own soul at what she saw, and Clarke was immediately paralyzed.
Lexa.

She was there, standing in the doorway, her hands curled into fists by her side, her eyes screaming with that same unseeing disbelief - though widened this time by something close to madness breaking through them.

Clarke couldn't move, couldn't breathe - couldn't even hope to look away anymore, her body now forcing her to endure the agony.

*Your fault... She is like this because of you...*

Anya stood abruptly, eyes distraught as she looked upon her former *seken* - the girl who didn't even notice that she was in the room, her attention solely focused on the blonde still curled into a ball on the floor. The warrior's expression was the epitome of heartache, so clearly torn as she looked between her *Heda* and Clarke, wanting desperately to stay and help but knowing she needed to go...

Clarke couldn't move, couldn't look away...

After an agonizing moment, Anya finally let out a defeated sigh, throwing Clarke one last weighted look before heading toward the door, only stopping to place a consoling hand on Lexa's shoulder before turning the corner and disappearing from sight.

Lexa didn't even acknowledge that the warrior had been there at all. She just stood there, eyes glossed over as they bored into the very depths of Clarke's writhing soul, so empty...

It was unlike anything Clarke had ever felt before - as if she'd been removed from her own body, looking down and watching helplessly as her heart was carved out of her chest by a rusted knife, a serrated edge... *Too much.*

*Not enough...*

Lexa took a step into the room, allowing the doors to slam shut behind her as she stared at Clarke, in something like a trance as she stood unmoving, unblinking - *frozen*... It was like the girl's mind had completely shut off, that spark of madness that'd been present when she'd burst into the room now extinguished into nothing as she simply stared at Clarke.

*All wrong... Everything is all wrong...*

*Why is she looking at me like that? Why can't she see me?*

Feeling like she was being strangled just sitting there on the floor, Clarke slowly rose to her feet, eyes never leaving Lexa's as she moved with utmost caution - as if confronting a wild animal, a creature defending the very last scraps of its meal after having gone so long without a single morsel.

*A being gripping onto the very last shreds of its sanity...*

Tears were burning the backs of Clarke's eyes and scorching at the raw insides of her throat, her heart feeling like a leaden weight now settled in her stomach, shriveling in on itself without a proper
rhythm. Her limbs felt numb, her head spinning while the world flipped itself completely off its axis - no longer slaves to petulant things like time and space...

Looking at the girl before her now, a being so clearly ravaged by her own inner turmoil, rendered a lifeless shell by the very person who’d once brought reason to madness - given her heart a reason to beat... She couldn't see her. She was nowhere to be found.

*Her Lexa*. She was gone.

Lost, confused, wandering the earth in search of the piece of her soul that she couldn't function without - the part that Clarke had replaced within her own body with the blood of slaughter, the agony of knowing that souls cannot be recovered once they've been taken from this life...

*Has she really been taken? Does she really not exist here?*

The girl with calloused hands normally used for such brutal labor, whose shoulders balanced the weight of an entire civilization, who’d believed that love was nothing but a weakness to be proven gross fallacy and lofty illusion...

The girl whose hands had been so gentle as they'd held onto Clarke's hips - providing her comfort and support as she'd learned to walk again -, whose shoulders had been so incredibly delicate beneath Clarke's hands as she’d washed away the dirt and grime collected from years of never having anyone care enough to see if Lexa, too, had been tarnished by the carnage life left behind.

The girl who’d re-defined her belief system in the wake of the discovery of the hidden secrets beneath depths of oceans blue, her soul's master found swimming below the surface, humbling her to her knees - giving her a profound sense of purpose, the all-encompassing need to worship the most immaculate version of the universe ever set before her eyes... Where had that girl gone? If what she saw before her was true...

No, it can't be... *She can't be gone. I won't let her be gone...*

*I refuse to live in a world where she doesn't exist.*

*You have to make her see you.*

Clearing her throat of the painful lump that'd formed there, Clarke took a step forward, eyes brimming with tears as she scanned Lexa's face.

To her utter surprise and complete horror, Lexa's eyes widened even further at Clarke's advance, the girl stumbling back a step so that her back slammed against the doors, hands clawing at the wood behind her as if in search of some kind of grip. The girl's eyes were alight with that same kind of madness, sheer terror now flashing through them as she looked at Clarke as if she was the focal point of her worst nightmare...

A sob ripped from Clarke's chest unbidden, one hand moving up to clap over her mouth as her blood thundered mercilessly in her ears.

*Not you... My Lexa, so kind, so gentle... This can't be you...*
"L-lexa?" Clarke forced out, voice strangled and hoarse as she took another step closer - even more cautiously than before.

Lexa began furiously shaking her head, her eyes ringed with dark and bruising circles closing, her fingernails nearly digging into the wood of the door.

"No," she whispered, the first word she'd spoken to Clarke, nothing but a harsh breath, a forced syllable - laced with more torment than Clarke would've thought possible for one human to endure. "No... This can't - I'm not... I can't... No, you're not real, you can't be real..."

The words were barely intelligible, Lexa mumbling them in a stream of consciousness beneath her breath - as if they were a mantra she'd had to repeat to herself many times before... Her eyes were still closed, head now shaking furiously back and forth, doing everything she could to rid herself of this latest concoction of her broken mind...

"You're not real, it's just - I'm just... No, you can't be real, you're not real."

Is this what it feels like to be torn in half, for your heart to be ripped to irreparable shreds?

Clarke was crying now, frozen in place as Lexa continued to mumble incoherently to herself, unable to take another step towards the distraught girl holding herself up against the door.

"Lexa, please," Clarke tried again, her voice cracking over the second word, her breaths coming out in stuttered gasps as she watched Lexa legitimately falling to pieces before her eyes.

Lexa's eyes suddenly snapped open at Clarke's plea, her head abruptly stopping its motion as she stared directly at the blonde, her eyes wild and desperate.

"No!!" Lexa cried, her voice the epitome of anguish, the tone of pure and all-encompassing sorrow. "You're not... You're not real, you're never real... It is always in my head and I can't - no... No, no, no..."

Another sob ripped from Clarke's chest, and this time she simply had to move forward, had to get closer.

The moment Clarke took another step towards her, though, Lexa made the most wretched sound the blonde had ever heard, as heart-wrenching as a knife literally tearing into Clarke's chest cavity. The girl turned so that she was curled into the wall, facing towards the window and away from the blonde, hyperventilating now as she continued to mumble the mantra that was legitimately gutting Clarke to the very core.

You're nothing but a ghost to her now, a memory that haunts her every waking minute... You're not her Clarke anymore.
"Yes I am," Clarke spoke aloud, surprising herself with the amount of steeled fervor laced in those three small words - not knowing which demon she was answering to at this point.

Her outburst must've surprised Lexa, too, as the girl was now staring right at her again, eyes wide and glistening with pure torture as she looked at Clarke. The blonde had never seen Lexa look this way before - had never even imagined it would be possible for the fearsome warrior to look so unhinged, so broken...

No... I won't accept that.

I'm not doing this without you.

Without even realizing what she was doing, Clarke was suddenly moving forward again, pulled by the same tether that'd bound them so inseparably together before, tears streaming freely down her face as her vision swam. Upon seeing Clarke approaching her once more, Lexa cried out, her legs seeming to buckle beneath her as she sunk down the wall, hands clawing helplessly at something, anything that could save her from this nightmare.

No matter how much it hurt, no matter how much deeper the knife tore beneath her sternum, Clarke kept going, not stopping until she quite literally dropped to her knees before Lexa, her torso nearly pressing into the girl's legs that she now hugged to her chest, completely subordinate to her own distress.

"Lexa," Clarke cooed ever-so-softly, bringing a trembling hand up to touch Lexa's arm, attempt to ground the girl in some way, only to have to drop it immediately back down to her side as Lexa flinched away from her - as if Clarke's touch might burn her.

Oh, god... Please don't make me do this... I don't think I can do this...

Lexa was legitimately whimpering now, her head buried in the crook of her arms that were bent and resting on the tops of her knees - trying with all of her might to curl in on herself and disappear...

"Lexa, please... Please, just - " Clarke choked on her own words, her chest heaving painfully against the dry sobs that'd replaced her normal breathing patterns. "Just look at me, Lexa... Please. I'm here, I'm right here. It's me..."

Lexa had started mumbling again, her voice now muffled and strained, and Clarke couldn't breathe, didn't know how to deal with this special circle of hell that'd now trapped the two of them alone... Lexa was full-on sobbing now, her cries having replaced the tormented mumblings with something much worse, in Clarke's mind, something much smaller - so incredibly helpless and broken...

How am I supposed to do this? I don't think I can do this...

What do you do when the one person who'd defined the very core of your being no longer recognized you anymore? How are you supposed to move forward?

"I know I broke my promise, and I know - " Clarke choked again, the words barely forming together
as she struggled through her own tears, Lexa continuing to sob wretchedly in front of her. "I know I don't... look the same - and it's wrong, everything is so wrong, but I..." Clarke closed her eyes, hiccuping sobs falling from her lips as she let her head droop forward in surrender - completely at Lexa's mercy, never really having stood a chance, in the first place.

*Let her destroy me, let her do her worst... Let her take everything from you if that is what she needs...*

"I'm still me."

It was so quiet, almost as if Clarke was testing the words out on herself, seeing how her body would react to such a heavy claim... *Am I really?*

Clarke breathed a deep, steadying breath, opening her eyes once more and looking back down at Lexa still so incredibly small before her - nearly retching with sobs that pierced the air and tore through Clarke like deadly blossoms from the knife already lodged within her... She wanted so badly to just wrap her arms around her love, whisper reassurances in her ears until Lexa found her way back, but she knew she couldn't - knew she couldn't force someone to see something, believe in something, that they simply wouldn't... Clarke knew she couldn't do such a thing, and it was *killing* her. She couldn't just sit here anymore and -

Her body seemingly acting on its own accord, Clarke sat back on her heels and pushed up until she was standing over Lexa, tears still streaming freely down her face - carving permanent tracks into her cheeks that spoke of every individual sorrow she'd never allowed her consciousness to deal with until this moment, all now channeled into a single avenue of pain... She turned away, her legs shaking and unsteady, only allowing her to walk a couple of steps before she collapsed onto her knees again - the impact barely registering as familiar numbness began to seep back into her core. *A protection mechanism...*

Had she been cognizant enough, Clarke might've registered the sudden silence in the room, the crying that'd stopped the very moment she'd stood up... As it were, though, Clarke just sat there staring blankly ahead of her, the open sketchbook on her bed stealing every ounce of her attention as the drawing seemed to haunt her - remind her of everything that could've been, *should've* been...

Clarke allowed her head to fall into her hands, fully giving herself over to the tide that'd been throwing her about for the past year or so, allowing it to bury her beneath its frigid depths - as cold as the pit of her core now, previously ablaze with the flames of life, the passion of loving and being loved...

She let it all in - every last part of it - , and she cried. Harder than she probably ever had, harder than she'd even though possible for such a lifeless replica of who she was supposed to be...

*Not hers... Not yours...*  
*No one's.*

Suddenly, Clarke felt a hand on her shoulder. Soft, tentative, *testing*...

Clarke's head immediately snapped up, eyes opening, only for her to be startled into silence, struck dumbfound for the first time in awhile...
Lexa. Right in front of her, in the same exact position on her knees as Clarke, a hand still resting on the blonde's shoulder. Looking at Clarke as if she wasn't afraid - just *curious*, maybe...

*How do I know you? What are you doing here?*

Lexa's eyes were wide, bloodshot, more emotions swimming through them than Clarke had ever seen before, unable to be discerned as green eyes seemed to pierce every inch of her skin - probing, searching, pleading...

*Can you be real? You can't possibly be real...*

*I don't think I can handle this if you're not.*

Clarke saw her chance, reflected in the pooling depths of green before her. She saw her chance, and she'd be damned if she didn't take it...

Slowly, more hesitantly than Clarke would've ever believed herself capable of, she brought her right hand up from her lap, every muscle in her arm trembling profusely, *desperately*... With the utmost care of one tasked with protecting the most sacred of beings, one handling their most precious thing, Clarke moved to cradle Lexa's cheek, her thumb brushing gently across tear tracks - *cleansing*.

*Let me take care of you... Let me show you the way.*

Almost instinctually, Lexa leaned into the touch, eyes closing, full lips parting with something close to ecstasy in an expression wholly overtaken by the bloodiest battle ever waged by such a tortured soul...

*If you are not real, then why does this feel so right? Why must you speak of home in such a way?*

*Please don't let this be a dream...*

"Lexa, look at me," Clarke whispered, tone trembling, on the very precipice of the point of no return. "Please, *hodnes*... It's me, it's just me... I'm *here* ..."

At the nickname, Lexa's eyes snapped open, widening impossibly as they began rapidly scanning Clarke's face, lips now parted in surprise with harsh breaths stuttering through. Clarke simply waited, her chest heaving as her tears stopped, feeling as if they'd both suddenly been strung up together by a single thread once more, dangling over their own bodies as if waiting to bury themselves beneath the weight of this moment.

*Please look at me... See me.*

Suddenly, something flashed across Lexa's eyes - a spark of light, igniting deep from within, the first embers of a flame long-extinguished...

Suddenly, Lexa was looking at Clarke as if she *knew* her.

Both of Lexa's hands came up then, quivering like leaves in the wind as she cupped the sides of
Clarke's face with so much tenderness that it started the blonde's tears right back up.

*It's been so long since someone was so gentle... No one is ever that gentle with me anymore...*

The spark was catching fire now, spreading the licks of tender flames through forests so dark, so cold - a light so familiar, blossoming on the back of a single burst of energy, a hint of vitality... There was more vulnerability in Lexa's eyes now than Clarke had ever seen, a kind so raw, so *pleading*, that all Clarke could do was stare - *hope*...

All at once, the tether holding them, suspending them above their own consciousnesses, suddenly snapped, sending them both hurtling back into their own bodies with the force of an entire universe expanding - creating room for them once more, space for them to be *together*...

That spark was now fully ablaze in Lexa's eyes, a different kind of madness present now, one that consumed her in a single burst, rendered her a being that *begged* to exist in this place - in this impossible kind of fantasy in which a wandering soul actually *can* find its mate again, in which that same soul now wanted nothing more than to set itself up for destruction at the hands of its only equal once again.

*I know you...*

Within a matter of seconds, it was as if Lexa had suddenly been snapped back to life, her hands everywhere all at once - gliding over Clarke's face, down her neck and shoulders, ghosting down the length of her arms... Her eyes were wild now, frantic, darting all over Clarke's frame as if checking for the places she'd once memorized - wholly consumed by this kind of tragic probing, this desperate search.

*I need you to be real... I need every part of you to be real and here with me.*

Clarke was holding her breath now, unable to even so much as blink as she waited for her fate to be handed to her - waited for her universe to reject her again. She didn't know if she could survive the fall...

"*Clarke?*"

Just a single word, a name, thrown into the vast expanse of oblivion to combine with other wisps of carbon rendered meaningless with time gone by...

It was *everything*.

Sitting before her now, looking at her as if Clarke was the most sacred of stars, the most surreal incarnation of divinity ever conjured into human consciousness, was Lexa. *Her* Lexa. Fragile, disbelieving, on the verge of being shattered completely if even a hint of the girl
before her proved to be an illusion... But Lexa, all the same.

Looking at her as if she believed Clarke would disappear if she blinked, would render her universe uninhabitable once more if the blonde so much as even strayed an inch from her...

*Have you found your way back to me?*

"Clarke, is that - ?" Lexa gulped, her voice so incredibly soft as tears began to fall from her eyes, lips trembling violently against everything coming back to her now. "Ai Klark? Ai hodnes - ?"

Unable to wait another moment, unable to bear the distance any longer, Clarke jumped forward, throwing her arms around Lexa's neck as she buried her face in the girl's hair, sobs now wracking through her once more. Lexa went rigid beneath her grasp, frozen for a moment in stunned disbelief as she attempted to process what was happening...

*It's alright... Everything is going to be alright... Just let me hold you now.*

Barely a moment later, though, Clarke was suddenly enveloped in the most familiar embrace her body had ever known, the greatest comfort of her entire life - Lexa's arms. Arms that were almost clawing at the blonde's back now, pulling her up and closer until she was hoisted in the girl's lap and forced to wrap her legs around the Lexa's waist - needing no space, no distance...

Lexa was sobbing even harder than Clarke, one hand tangled in blonde locks as the other gripped the small of Clarke's back - protecting, shielding, *daring* anyone to remove the girl from her grasp, promising vengeance to anyone who might try...

They sat there wrapped in each other's arms, sobbing, rocking back and forth on the very spot they'd once danced on, and nothing was more right - nothing was more perfect. Two broken halves of a shattered whole, re-defining the way they could fit together...

Though they had so far to go - so incredibly far -, the shift in the air was felt once more; a shift towards a new kind of permanence, a place where they could *thrive*...

*A home.*

Lexa held Clarke as if she still couldn't believe her luck - as if she wouldn't even dream of disrupting this moment of bliss with the tragedy of their circumstance. Wrapped in each other's arms, blocking out the rest of the world for the foreseeable future, Clarke finally realized the only truth she needed, the one discovery that could actually make her whole again...

*You are my everything.*

*I have found you.*
Chapter End Notes

Hope I got at least some feels going haha.
Consider this the first part of the reunion... More feels to come (hopefully), more reunions, the festival, more plot, and - as always - CLEXA!! (;
I'd love to hear your thoughts!
Is sorry gonna cut it this time?
My sincerest apologies for the wait, my friends. November was a dumpster fire of a month and then finals hit and you know how it goes... I can happily say that I'm off for the holidays and bored as hell, so I guess that means faster updates, huh? (;
Did I plan on updating that same day that the season 4 trailer dropped? Some might say yes, but others might call it mere coincidence. Regardless, I'm here to provide a much-needed Clexa fix after that trailer. Am I gonna watch season 4? Of course. The show is still one of my problematic faves. Am I gonna remain salty about Clexa till the end of my days? Oh hell yes. Life is a strange paradox that way...
Anywaaaays, without further ado, here is chapter 3!! It's a mammoth.

Enjoy (;

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It could've been days that they sat there wrapped in each other's embrace, clinging on to the only person who'd seemed to have been able to define what truth meant to them. Time was funny that way...

Clarke's tears had long since ceased, her sole purpose having become holding Lexa as tightly as she could, providing any sort of comfort to the girl who continued to sob so heart-wrenchingly into the blonde's neck. Clarke's legs were still wrapped around Lexa's waist, her entire body situated in the girl's lap as she was unable to move even an inch, barely even daring to breathe too deeply as it might distance them just the slightest. One of her hands cradled Lexa's head gently as the other rubbed soothing circles into the small of the girl's back, doing her best to calm, soothe, heal... There would probably be small half-moon indentations left behind from where Lexa's fingers had quite literally latched into Clarke's back through the fabric, but Clarke didn't mind at all, would let Lexa take what she needed for as long as she could. It was the least she could do, really...

I'm here... I'm not going anywhere. I've got you.

I love you.

They were the unspoken words that guided Clarke's every movement, every thought - words that she knew she wasn't ready to say just yet... The last time she'd said them, it was as if they'd been a
catalyst for eternal punishment, a phrase signifying the end of an era - capping off a time of relative ease in comparison to what lay ahead. They'd been feeble encapsulators of the feelings that'd seemed to re-define her sole purpose, re-make her soul's image in what felt like a single instance of realization, and it'd taken everything within Clarke's power not to come to associate them with a different kind of re-definition now, a different kind of shift - the one that'd cut away at the raw edges of her soul, leaving it deformed and malnourished over the course of the past year.

How could she possibly say them now? How would they ever manage to come close to the feelings she felt surging within her as she held her best thing in her arms? Everything was so complicated, so wrong, and they'd only just found each other again... Could she really expect those three words to hold the same meaning when literally everything else in their lives had changed?

Lost in her thoughts as she was, Clarke didn't even notice how Lexa's wracking sobs had quieted to feeble whimpers, the girl's face still pressed against the skin of Clarke's neck as if she wished to physically merge their bodies together somehow. Clarke was only drawn out of her own head when she felt desperate hands sliding up from where they'd clung to her back and shoulders, moving to tangle in blonde locks as Lexa began to tremble slightly in Clarke's embrace, nearly radiating agitation all of a sudden. It was as if the shock of finding Clarke again had worn off in the span of mere seconds, and now Lexa was left drained and slightly panicked...

Without warning, Lexa suddenly moved back from where her head was tucked beneath Clarke's, her hands sliding around to cup both of the blonde's cheeks as frantic green eyes scanned every inch of Clarke's face - probing once again, searching for any indication of fallacy... Clarke let her do it, simply content to stare right back into Lexa's eyes with a gentle calmness glazing over blues, her hands moving up and around to clasp behind Lexa's neck, her thumbs ghosting soothingly back and forth along the girl's jawline. Lexa's eyes were watery and bloodshot, seemingly unable to focus on a single part of Clarke's face as if the entire thing would disappear if she didn't continuously memorize it all - checking to see if the blonde was still, indeed, real. The girl's hands trembled where they gripped Clarke's face and held her still, Lexa's expression overcome with that same tide of emotions that'd washed over her as soon as she'd been able to process the blonde's existence before her once more.

As if on instinct, Clarke turned her head to the left a little to place a gentle kiss to Lexa's wrist, causing the girl to gasp as her eyelids fluttered and she leaned into the touch. A single tear slipped from beneath Clarke's closed eyelids - the product of the moment of peace they found themselves wholly encompassed in -, and the blonde felt the swipe of a calloused thumb immediately moving to catch the tear and wipe it away. A soft smile began to dance at Clarke's lips, her eyes still closed as she leaned into Lexa's palm, and she felt the sudden need to be closer to the girl once more, leaning forward to tuck her head into the brunette's neck with her arms sliding down towards the girl's waist.

Lexa's arms immediately moved to accommodate the new position, this time taking her turn to cradle Clarke's head with one hand as the other gripped onto the fabric at the small of the blonde's back in a white-knuckled fist.

They stayed that way for infinite moments more, not talking - barely more than breathing -, simply relishing in the other's presence, allowing the weight of the other pressed against them to bring them a kind of freedom they'd forgotten over the course of their separation. Their grips like vices, their limbs forming immovable cages for the other, it was a full-bodied kind of re-acquaintance, a physical trigger for muscle memory - bringing them back to the place where they knew each other best... It
wrapped up in the moment - and Lexa - as she was, Clarke felt it only natural to press a gentle kiss above the girl's pulse point, her lips ghosting over soft skin like the stroke of a feather.

The effect was immediate.

Lexa gasped, her entire body shuddering as her hand at the small of Clarke’s back tightened infinitesimally before moving with the other to grip onto the blonde's shoulders, silently urging Clarke to move back and look at her. Clarke obeyed immediately, her own hands moving back around to cup the sides of Lexa's face, her eyes soft and dancing in the growing moonlight. Emerald eyes pooled before depths of blue with the weight of the physical reminder of their shared connection - as undeniable as the ironclad tether that'd bound them together in the first place.

Lexa rapidly scanned Clarke's face as the blonde stared serenely back at her, waiting for the moment as inevitable as the rumble of thunder after a strike of lightening - waiting for the natural order to restore itself once more. Shallow breaths escaped plump lips that trembled with the weight of anticipation, the side of a looking glass reflecting two halves of the same whole in tandem. Crackling heaviness surged between them, neither daring to delay the inevitable as the tendril of light impaled the darkened clouds above in search of the ground on which nature had given it precedent to impact...

I'm real... I'm here...

I'm yours.

The bolt struck.

Without warning, Lexa surged forward, a sob tearing from her chest as she smashed her lips to Clarke's none-too-gently. The force of the kiss was so intense that the blonde was sent tumbling helplessly backwards onto the cold floor of her bedroom beneath her, her legs still tangled around Lexa's waist and her hands forced to snake around the brunette's neck to hold on for dear life. Before the impact could jar Clarke even the slightest bit, though, Lexa's arms were up and around the back of the blonde's neck, pressing them impossibly closer together while simultaneously shielding her love from any harm...

That was all Clarke could register as she was suddenly transported into a pseudo-reality she'd all-but-forgotten by the press of lips, alone - a reality in which the weight of a warm body atop her own meant a kind of weightlessness one could only contemplate in fits of ecstasy and pure bliss. A reality in which a single kiss could ground while also uplift, could calm while also setting ablaze - in which a life could be deemed worth livable once more.

Perhaps a kiss can speak of all the things words so seldom manage to capture...

Perhaps this is how we say 'I love you' now...

Lexa's trembling hands were everywhere at once - tangled in Clarke's hair, worshipping up and down the length of the blonde's arms, moving to grasp onto hips and re-acquaint themselves with every dip and curve they'd ever equated with home -, a kind of desperation radiating through her touch like nothing Clarke had ever known. Clarke, for her part, was just as frantic, her hands shaking like leaves as they raked up and down the brunette's back, seemingly unable to find a grip as everywhere and nowhere couldn't seem to be enough. Their bodies shuddered and writhed like the
loose ends of a live wire now re-activated by the very source of its power, and it was nearly too much for either to bear in their current state...

Both girls were sobbing once more, salty tears catching at the bows of lips as retched sounds escaped the two, neither willing to even so much as contemplate pulling away for air as the kiss rendered them in the throes of passion - all frantic nips and gratuitous tugs as they gave themselves over to a familiar erotic dance of tongues. It was the personification of neediness, of want, of all but hungering for the part of themselves they'd been forced to function without - a part they now had within their grasp once more.

A part that neither had been able to let go of in the first place...

Almost as quickly as the passion had overtaken the both of them in the first place, it suddenly departed with the softest brush of lips against teeth, leaving the two girls in a state of pure weakness as Lexa suddenly went limp on top of Clarke, her hands moving up from the girl's waist to loop around the back of the blonde's neck. Before either of them could process anything, Lexa was suddenly sobbing uncontrollably into the crook of Clarke's neck, holding the girl tighter than ever before, the blonde unable to so much as breathe as Lexa all but smothered her in the wake of such a frenzy. Clarke didn't mind in the slightest, though, her hands naturally moving up to their rightful place cradling Lexa's head and pressing comfortingly into the small of the girl's back. Her legs stayed tightly wrapped around Lexa's waist, her eyes closing as she allowed her silent tears to be understandably overshadowed by the wrenching sobs tearing from her love's chest where it heaved against her own.

She needed to let Lexa have this. She would give the girl a million of these moments if she had to. For, what better way to re-discover herself than through the solace of the better part of her soul?

After what felt like millennia in minutes, Clarke began to worry for the state of Lexa's airways as the girl began to choke and sputter a little on the last remnants of her sobs. With the ease of a trained warrior well-attuned to every fluctuation of weight, Clarke gently rolled them over so that they were both on their sides, still tangled together as Lexa's hands were now fisted in the collar of Clarke's shirt, immovable. Knowing full-well that the girl might pass out if she remained so worked up, Clarke moved to stroke Lexa's hair with utmost tenderness, maneuvering as best she could to press the softest of kisses to the top of the girl's head. When Lexa's sobs only picked up at the action, Clarke's heart jumped in something akin to panic.

"Shh, baby," Clarke cooed softly, resorting to a tactic her mother had often used to ground her in moments of despair. The blonde made to move her head back slightly so that she could get a better look at Lexa as she continued to speak. "You're safe, I've got you - "

As soon as Clarke had made to move away from Lexa in just the slightest, though, the girl had quite literally yelped, cutting off the blonde's words as she scrambled to eliminate the wisp of space that'd been created between them, all but smashing their bodies together once more as she latched on even tighter to Clarke's frame. The movement, as small as it was, was enough to put into context what the blonde had been failing to conceptualize up until that moment - was enough to give the tiniest hint of an inkling into the depth of Lexa's grief over Clarke's loss, over just how devastated she'd actually been...

It was enough, and it was too much.
How am I supposed to be able to handle all that which is my fault? How am I supposed to own up to that?

Is such a pendulum swing in one’s reality even survivable?

Feeling suddenly overwhelmed by everything left unsaid, the coldness of the floor beginning to raze bumps across her bare skin, Clarke moved to wrap both arms around Lexa’s waist, expertly shifting them upwards so that they were in a sitting position once more. With still-trembling hands, Clarke methodically hoisted one of Lexa’s legs and then the other so that they were both wrapped tightly just above her hips, the breath forced out of her slightly when Lexa instinctively squeezed Clarke even closer to her as her arms remained in an unbreakable clasp behind the blonde’s neck.

Without a word, Clarke easily rose from the floor, sliding her hands to Lexa’s backside to grip onto the girl protectively as she continued to cry softly into the blonde’s neck. Closing the distance between where they’d sprawled together on the floor and the bed, Clarke moved to sit down as carefully as possible on the edge of her bed, trying her best not to jostle Lexa too much - though the girl remained wholly oblivious to the movements as she simply burrowed deeper into Clarke's being.

Doing the only thing she knew how to at this point, Clarke began rubbing soothing circles into Lexa's back, knowing full-well that she wouldn't be able to move from this position in any way for quite some time. Lexa's hands were fisted into the collar of her shirt now, holding on for dear life, and Clarke vaguely realized that the both of them had lost their cloaks somewhere along the line - the symbolic pieces of clothing that marked them as "other," as leaders of something greater than themselves. How apt...

Time continued to weave in and out of rhythm around them, keeping tune with the growing sounds of the festival from below as moonlight danced across the dusty surfaces of the room. The outside world was becoming a foreign beast in Clarke's mind, a strange sort of surreality settling over her as Lexa's weight grew heavier and heavier in her lap.

She was really here. In Polis. In her old room. Holding the Commander of the 12 Clans in her lap as the girl tried to reconcile the cruelest versions of her reality into something less mangled, less damaged. Holding the entire fabric of her universe together by a thread as thin as the layer of glass she'd been walking on for the past year...

She was holding Lexa. Her Lexa. The one person who would seal herself beneath the glass devoid of oxygen if it meant that Clarke would be able to walk safely across. The one person who'd redefined everything she'd ever known about sacrifice, love, and home... She was here now. In Clarke's arms.

How was she supposed to handle that?

The tears started up again without Clarke even realizing it, and, soon enough, she and Lexa were right back where they started - sobbing inconsolably and holding each other like they were tumbling from a cliff’s edge into a bottomless ravine without any concept of their trajectory. It was overwhelming - too much and not enough. Never enough...

I need you to stay with me... Never leave me.

I love you.
After what felt like hours more of chest-aching sobs and pathetic sounds of a kind of simultaneous
heartbreak and mend, Clarke suddenly became aware of the featherlight press of trembling kisses up
her neck, across her jawline and over every inch of her face, healing... She opened her eyes, willing
her tears to slow as Lexa continued to press gentle kisses across her skin that were as full of
paradoxes as the very situation they found themselves in.

"Clarke," Lexa breathed, the name a reverent prayer on her lips, whispered between relentless kisses
that easily worked their way beneath every protective layer Clarke had put up.

The brunette stopped suddenly, abruptly pulling back and moving so that her hands firmly cupped
the sides of Clarke's face as her eyes scanned every inch, seemingly at risk of falling into a panic
once more. Feeling a tide of warmth and calmness fall over her, Clarke moved to clasp her fingers
behind Lexa's neck, fingertips toying with the curls at the base of the girl's hairline in a way that
caused Lexa's entire body to shudder with pleasure, her eyes closing for a brief moment as she
attempted to process the sensation. Clarke was somehow the epitome of serenity all of a sudden
much different than her previous state -, her eyes shining with uninhibited affection, content to wait
for the rest of her life if that's what Lexa needed.

Everything is different, but entirely the same...

After a quiet moment, Lexa seemed to remember herself again, opening her eyes to once again bore
into the depth of Clarke's, unable to keep from desperately scanning every inch of the blonde she
could see - still searching for some kind of explanation.

"I don't..." Lexa choked, trailing off into hoarseness as her eyes began to water once more. Clarke's
expression softened impossibly upon seeing it, shaking her head a little as if the gesture, alone, would
be enough to ward off her love's despair.

Lexa gulped, closing her eyes against the single tear that slipped down her cheek before Clarke could
catch it. The brunette appeared to be in the throes of some kind of internal battle all of a sudden, a
heaviness seemingly washing over her as she leaned forward in search of solace. Clarke immediately
moved to match her position, resting their foreheads together as she silently willed the girl to find
some semblance of inner peace - a kind that she, herself, could no longer seem to find, either...

"How?" Lexa finally rasped, her breath trembling in harsh spurts against Clarke's lips as her entire
frame quaked in the blonde's grasp. Clarke held steady, gulping against the grating rawness she felt
at the brokenness detectable in Lexa's voice. "How is this... You were - " Lexa swallowed harshly,
cutting herself off as something like a whimper bubbled out of her chest unbidden. "All this time...
You were alive, and I - I didn't... How? How?"

The almost childlike quality of her voice, the way that it shook with the realization of a different path
- a one that led to a reality in which she'd gone after Clarke somehow and had managed to save them
both from more than a lifetime's worth of peril... That was enough to knock the wind out of Clarke's
chest.

How was she supposed to answer that? How could she subject Lexa to the torture of knowing that
she could've done something to save Clarke after all this time? No matter how Clarke framed it - no matter how adamantly she insisted that there was nothing Lexa could've done, that there was no way that this was her fault - Lexa would carry this burden for the rest of her days, because of course she would. In her mind, Clarke's kidnapping and subsequent "re-programming" would be her fault, would always be one of the many shortcomings to add to the list of those that'd cost hundreds the purity of their souls.

How could Clarke do that to her? Was the truth really worth that much? Not to mention the fact that it might quite literally cost Roan and Echo their lives should the Commander find out the role they'd played in all of this.

*Why must she bear this burden, too? Are my shoulders not sturdy enough? Are my feet too worn?*

"**Hodnes, beja,**" Lexa pleaded, deliberately stroking her thumbs across Clarke's cheekbones as she brushed their noses together, doing everything she could to draw the blonde back to her. Clarke unclasped her hands from behind the brunette's neck, moving them to grasp onto Lexa's shoulders for dear life as her jaw clenched to the point of snapping.

Surely, this was too soon -

The sound of the bedroom doors opening startled both girls, causing them to whip around towards the source of the sound as Lexa immediately encircled Clarke in a protective hold, her body tensing against the unwanted intrusion. Their torsos were fitted tightly together, the sides of their heads pressed against one another as they watched Anya stride around the corner and into the room towards them, her expression somewhere between immense worry and unmistakable guilt.

Both girls seemed to relax in each other's arms at the sight of her, though Lexa seemed to shift impossibly closer to Clarke where she sat on the blonde's lap still, arms and legs firmly wrapped around her love.

"**I apologize for the intrusion, Heda,**" Anya began, coming to a stop a few yards from where the two girls sat together on the edge of the bed, her brows knitted together and her posture tense, "but the Coalition leaders are anxious to get the festival underway, and I'm afraid I can't stall them any longer..."

At the warrior's words, Lexa immediately tensed in Clarke's grasp, tightening her hold on the blonde as she moved back slightly to shoot a frantic glance at her love, entirely torn and obviously unwilling to move even an inch from Clarke. Anya seemed to sense it, too, as she shifted uneasily before them, her eyes darting between them as her lips formed a hard line - oddly resembling a parent attempting to determine how best to deal with an unstable child they loved entirely too much.

Feeling the weight of the warrior's protectiveness intermingled with her own, Clarke kept her gaze glued to Anya's, doing her best to ignore the pair of green eyes just a breath away from her face, searing into every existing layer.

"**Of course, Anya,**" Clarke replied kindly, her voice a gentle lilt above the din of the crowds wafting up from below. "**We shouldn't keep them waiting any longer, but just... Give us another moment,**
"Yes, of course, Klark," Anya responded immediately, seemingly grateful for the blonde's easy acceptance of the situation, inclining her head in a gesture of unprecedented respect towards the girl. "I will inform the clan leaders right away."

With that, the warrior turned swiftly on her heels and hastened out of the room, a renewed sense of purpose invigorating her stride.

The moment the doors clicked shut, a pair of hands were cupping Clarke's face, turning the blonde gently towards her once more as a pair of much more desperate lips took hold of the blonde's, needing the comfort, the closeness. Clarke responded eagerly, her hands moving to tangle in Lexa's hair as the brunette's moved to fist into the front of Clarke's shirt, drawing them closer with what appeared to resemble the grip of one dangling from a cliff's edge, wanting, needing, to hang on to that tragic existence just a moment more.

After a few more moments of messy kissing that screamed of words yet unspoken, answers demanded but not yet found, the girls parted with the trivial need to catch their breath, panting against each other's kiss swollen lips as Lexa rubbed the tip of her nose against Clarke's out of old habit. The action brought a soft smile to Clarke's lips, and she tenderly massaged Lexa's scalp as the girl closed her eyes in pure bliss, nearly falling limp in the blonde's arms where she was still firmly held.

"Shall we rejoin the world of the living?" Clarke inquired lightly, aiming for levity above the heaviness that seemed to compress their spines in the most painful of ways - though not missing the irony behind her words.

At the question, Lexa tensed once more in Clarke's lap, her hands suddenly unable to find a solid grip on the blonde's body as her chest heaved staggered breaths, losing the ongoing internal battle with the agonizing frenzy threatening to overtake her every moment she remained in Clarke's presence. Lexa loosed a broken whimper after a moment, the tragic sound tearing from her throat as she tightened her legs around the blonde's waist, quite literally terrified at the thought of having to be physically separated from the blonde.

"I can't - I just... I don't know if I can - " Lexa choked on the words, her voice a painful rasp against her throat, her trembling hands tangling in Clarke's braids as she frantically shook her head. "I can't be away from you again, I don't - I don't know if I'll be able to bear it, I - "

"Lexa, listen to me," Clarke cut her off, her hands tightening in Lexa's braids as she pressed their foreheads even closer together, every bit the steadfast warrior she'd been trained to be - though with a much different kind of conviction. "I will never leave your side again - not tonight, not ever ... With everything else I'm uncertain of - with all the things we still have yet to talk about -, you have to know that that is the one thing I'm sure of... I'm not leaving you again. I'm not going anywhere - "
"How can you say that?!" Lexa cried desperately, her voice cracked and broken beneath the weight of those four words. "How can you know that?! How?! You can't, and I - what if you...what happens when you - "

Never leave me... As long as you stay with me...

I have broken my promise.

It ruptured something deep in Clarke’s chest, something important... Because, beneath the veil of wishful promises of idyllic futures, Clarke knew that Lexa was right. Clarke couldn't know that; in fact, she knew quite the opposite...

She was the Queen of Azgeda now, a position as long-lasting as her own lifespan. She would have to leave Lexa at some point - probably in the near future - to return to her kingdom, most likely without knowing when they would be reunited next. In their current reality, Clarke didn't have the foresight necessary to determine whether or not they'd even be able to do this at all -

No.

She couldn't think like that. Not after everything that'd happened, all that it'd taken to get her back here...

No, she would fight for this harder than she'd fought for anything else in her life because it was worth it. They might be withered and decrepit versions of the former selves that'd forged the bond between them in the first place, but they were still them. They were still Clarke and Lexa, and they could do this.

They would, because a love like theirs was enough to move mountains, to re-shape the earth in the image reflected in their own hearts because it was theirs.

Life was about more than just surviving. She only had to make Lexa believe it.

"You're right," Clarke whispered after what felt like hours of tortured silence, their foreheads still pressed together as they both willed themselves not to be lost in this. "I can't promise that I'll never leave again - " An anguished sob tearing from Lexa's throat, hands nearly clawing into Clarke's scalp as if that would be enough to negate what she'd just heard. "But I can promise you this: no matter what happens when we leave this room, or how far apart we're forced to go when the time comes, I will never leave you - do you understand me? I will always be right here, " Clarke vowed, accentuating the words with firm presses into Lexa's chest with the hand she'd freed from silky braids. Lexa was sobbing again, her cries wracking through her entire frame as she helplessly curled inward on Clarke's lap, tucking her head into the crook of the blonde's neck as if needing solace in the scent and heartbeat pounding there.

"If there's one thing I know right now, it's that there's so much we can't know, so much we'll never even be able to guess... But, I can promise you that I will be here with you every step of the way somehow, and that's gotta be enough, right? Keryon knows we've acted on far less than that before..." Despite herself, despite everything, Lexa chuckled - a wet, somber, hiccuped sort of laugh
that must've originated on the back of a sob, but a laugh, no less.

*That* was enough...

Clarke moved so that one hand cradled the back of Lexa's head, her other rubbing soothing circles into the girl's back as Lexa adjusted her arms to encircle Clarke in the tightest of embraces, the most glorious of hugs. Smiling softly to herself, Clarke slowly and surely rose from the bed, relief blossoming warmly throughout her body as Lexa finally untangled her legs from around the blonde and allowed herself to be set gently back on her feet.

The brunette's head still tucked into the crook of her neck and the girl's arms forming an unbreakable enclosure around her back, Clarke was able to take the deepest breath she'd taken in months, oxygen filling her lungs much easier without the iron bonds restricting the muscle's expansion.

"Besides," Clarke continued, her smile stretching more noticeably across her features now, "I vaguely remember telling you once before that I'm far too stubborn to die, and, as it stands, it would appear that I'm too thick-headed to *stay* dead, as well. I guess you really can't get rid of me, after all..."

The laughter that sprang from Lexa's lips as the girl leaned back to press her forehead against Clarke's, her hands moving to cup the blonde's face out of sheer worshipful adoration - it sounded so much like freedom, reverberating through Clarke's chest like the beat of a celebratory drum, that Clarke knew.

With everything left unsaid, with so much inevitable pain still lingering on the horizon and waiting to be felt, Clarke somehow knew they'd be alright. Maybe not now, maybe not under any pre-conceived notion of what she believed "alright" to be, but someday...

Someday, this would all feel like a distant memory, a blip of heartache on an otherwise flawless existence filled with perfect imperfections. Right now, though....

Now, this felt like *home*. 
Lexa hadn't stopped touching her.

Not from the moment they'd disentangled from each other to call upon the handmaidens to prepare their Commander for her opening remarks before the population of Polis. Not even when they'd gotten into the elevator to descend through the tower...

She and Clarke were alone in the elevator as it descended, Lexa unabashedly staring at Clarke's face with something like awestricken wonder, green eyes darting between both of Clarke's as if trying to determine when the flecks of grey had seeped into oceans of blue. Their fingers were intertwined between them as Lexa used her free hand to cup Clarke's cheek with utmost tenderness.

Suddenly, Lexa's eyes widened and her thumb stilled its movement on Clarke's cheek. With the impossible gentleness of one stroking over an open wound, Lexa brushed her thumb across the trademark white scars of Azgeda now permanently etched into Clarke's cheeks - apparently only noticing them for the first time -, a million indiscernible emotions flashing through her eyes as she attempted to read every thought Clarke's face had to offer her. Feeling slightly self-conscious for the first time she could remember, Clarke ducked her head bashfully, her free hand coming up to cup over Lexa's on her cheek, eyes closing to hide away the secrets she couldn't allow the other girl to uncover just yet.

With that same gentleness, Lexa delicately lifted the blonde's head back up to her eye level, placing a tender kiss on Clarke's forehead before resting her own against it.

"You're so beautiful, hodnes," Lexa breathed against Clarke's lips, a sobering sincerity and reverence burning through even the smallest of whispers. "Do not ever think..." She trailed off, making a point of tracing what Clarke knew to be the longest, most visible scar curving from the top of her right temple to down along her cheekbone, her calloused fingers like the dust of a gentle feather along the blonde's heated skin. "These," Lexa continued, her touch emphasizing the fervor behind her words, "remind me that you are still here with me... They are beautiful."

Feeling overcome by everything that'd ever defined love throughout the course of her existence, Clarke loosed something like a sob mixed with a whimper, surging forward to capture Lexa's lips with her own so that she could attempt to convey everything she'd never be able to put into words. Lexa responded in kind, a surprisingly needy whimper bubbling in her throat as she laced her fingers in Clarke's hair to pull the blonde closer to her.

Wrapped up in each other as they were, it was only the jolt and metallic bang of the elevator coming to a halt on the ground floor that could startle them apart, Clarke practically jumping out of her skin in the process. Ever the calming presence, though, Lexa seemed un-phased, her softened eyes never leaving Clarke's face for a second as she simply readjusted their position to keep a more discrete hand on the small of the blonde's back. Turning away from the tempting emeralds threatening to capture her in their stead once more, Clarke focused her attention on the sliding of the doors as they opened into the hectic torchlit hall of the tower's ground floor.

Seemingly registering the churning knots that'd settled in the pit of her stomach for the first time, Clarke hesitated at the back wall of the elevator, working her bottom lip between her teeth as she was
suddenly overwhelmed by just how out of place she now felt here - even with Lexa's eyes glued to her, the pressure of the girl's hand grounding her to the moment. It was a sinking feeling, like the pull of an anchor attached to the most prominent of her insecurities, given a leaden sort of weight by the time spent in solitary imprisonment in Azgeda.

*Everything is different, but entirely the same...*

"Clarke?" The sweetest of whispers, tickling the stray hairs by her ear, as supplicating as the hand still burning through the layers of her formal uniform beneath the glorious fur-lined white cloak she'd packed for the celebration.

*Be here for her... If for no other reason, do it for her.*

Giving the subtlest of reassuring nods, still keeping her eyes focused straight ahead of her into the bustling hallway, Clarke made her way from the elevator, Lexa keeping perfect pace with the blonde as her hand remained in place. The two of them stepped out of the metallic box, immediately sending a sort of shockwave through the hall as every single visible person came to a complete standstill, gaping at the blonde with open bewilderment. Their faces were all interchangeable versions of shock and confusion, their identities indiscernible to Clarke as she struggled to maintain a healthy breathing pattern. Clearly, word of Clarke's return from the dead had travelled fast...

"Ai kwin." Echo suddenly appeared before the blonde, emerging from the still-frozen crowd of tower staff in the hall before them, arms clasped behind her back and expression carefully neutral. She wore her traditional uniform beneath a more luxurious overcoat lined with the fur of one of her best kills, her hair kept back in its usual intricate braids.

Clarke felt Lexa immediately stiffen beside her, the girl's hand gripping on to the back of the blonde's cloak and fisting into her uniform as Clarke saw the brunette's jaw clench with a nearly audible snap in her periphery. The Commander's body was tensed as if caught between deciding whether or not to encircle Clarke in her arms and shield her from the Azgeda warrior - and, possibly, all of the living world - for the rest of eternity, or simply draw her sword and shove Clarke behind her.

Too distracted by the amount of palpable tension that'd built in a matter of seconds upon her advisor's appearance before her, Clarke had failed to notice Anya standing directly beside Echo, her face an impressive lesson in stoicism as her eyes darted meaningfully between Echo's face and Lexa's - watching, waiting for even the smallest of signals from her Commander...

Heart rate noticeably quickening at the base of her neck, Clarke cleared her throat, stepping forward slightly to regard her warrior more closely even as Lexa's hand tightened on the handle of her sword. Clarke pointedly ignored the girl as she allowed a small smile to play at her lips as she scanned Echo's impassive features.

"Ready for the festivities, I see," Clarke noted playfully, aiming for levity as the air grew thicker around them still. Echo returned the small smile in kind, the expression giving her a slightly more human appearance before the two rigid women carefully watching the exchange beside them - looking for any hint of forced niceties for Clarke's sake, no doubt.
Clarke couldn't blame them.

"As are you, ai kwën," Echo replied just as lightly, her grin going slightly crooked as she began a once-over of her queen. She seemed utterly oblivious to the gravity of the moment. "And, might I say, I was exceptionally correct about the leather..." Echo trailed off with a cocky quirk of her eyebrow, eyes trained on Clarke's hips.

At the warrior's gratuitous look, Lexa's hand twitched at Clarke's back, her expression noticeably darkening in the blonde's periphery as she subtly angled herself in front of Clarke. Anya, for her part, had the appearance of a bow pulled taut, ready to loose an arrow at a moment's notice should she be given the word. The air was now practically visible with the amount of thick and wafting tension emitting from the foursome, emphasizing the continuing reticence of the tower staff as they appeared entranced by the encounter, as well. Clarke nearly gulped.

A change of subject was clearly in order lest they desired encroaching suffocation...

"Is it customary for a clan leader's advisor to escort them to the festivities?" Clarke asked, breaking through the silence with as much innocence as she still possessed in her weathered form as she looked between the two Trikru women so incredibly stiff beside her. It came out much more wary than intended.

At her inquiry, Anya finally met her gaze for the first time, eyes infinitesimally softening as her expression remained carefully stoic.

"Only in the case of a new leader's formal introduction before the people of Polis," the warrior answered evenly, eyes attentive to Echo's every minute movement in her periphery. "The Commander will proceed you, make the announcement of your ascension to power, and then you will be called upon to witness the ritual dance that officially marks the beginning of the festivities at the Commander's side - a proclamation of the continued strength of the Coalition... Your advisor will walk you to the stage and accompany you throughout the night for your protection should you desire her to."

Clarke nodded, pondering the words for a moment as she slotted a glance at Lexa from beneath her eyelids, the girl having remained oddly quiet for some time now. To the unknowing eye, the Commander would most likely appear to be in her usual form - the addition of the poignant exhaustion that'd hollowed out the circles beneath her eyes like the permanent marks of mourning something Clarke still wasn't used to -, all calm and collected stoicism masking the poignantly intelligent spirit burning beneath, but Clarke knew better... Within the depths of forests green burned the fire of agony - a kind of agony that seemed to be ebbing and flowing to the forefront of the girl's mind like the unsteady rise and fall of a chest impaled by knife blade. An agony Clarke was quite familiar with, having been driven to contemplate its power over the human spirit during the emotional troughs of solitary confinement on two separate occasions - the first after the loss of her father, and the second after having ordered the removal of hundreds of souls from existence. It was a brutal sort of process, often rendering its subject something like a slave to the unsteady frequency of its occurrence - the individual never knowing when they were going to be swept away in the tide of emotional instability and self-inflicted torment. Clarke had immediately noticed its raw-edged presence in the windows of Lexa's eyes, barely contained for Clarke's sake once the girl had recognized her again - apparently at the surface once more at the mere mention of having to leave
"Shall we proceed, Heda?" Anya inquired respectfully, cutting the heavy silence once again as Clarke unabashedly stared at Lexa's profile now, still lost in thought. Lexa continued to avoid her gaze, jaw working slightly as she turned a little to regard her warrior. To Clarke's knowing eyes, the Commander's expression verged on pained with the attempts to keep her emotions in check now.

Apparently deciding against a verbal response, Lexa simply gave a curt nod, her jaw clenching as her throat worked painfully, giving nothing else away. At that, Anya immediately turned on her heels and made her way through the hall toward the closed doors leading out to the main courtyard, falling into the stiff stance of a waiting warrior as two guards remained statues on either side of the doors.

Lexa didn't move. Not even a flinch. Clarke could feel the girl's hand now trembling with the force of her grip on the back of the blonde's cloak, and it took everything in Clarke's power not to just wrap the brunette up in her arms and never let go. The past couple of hours had taken such an obvious toll on Lexa that the blonde was somewhat surprised the girl hadn't caved in on herself yet - or stolen away with Clarke and foregone her formal duties for good. Clarke supposed she shouldn't have allowed herself to forget just how incredibly strong Lexa was, though - would always be, regardless of the depth of the hollowed-out circles beneath her eyes...

What have I done to you?

"I suppose I'll be right behind you, then, Heda," Clarke rasped, her voice low and gravelly with unspoken emotion that threatened to pool in her eyes if Lexa didn't move. She'd hoped the other girl would've been able to catch the hidden meaning in her words, would be able to find strength in the promise there.

I'm not going anywhere. I'll be with you every step of the way...

I'm not leaving you.

At the sound of the blonde's voice, Lexa seemed to come back to herself a little bit, a painful swallow working the muscles of her throat as she closed her eyes for a moment, doing her best to temper her unbidden rawness. The obvious anguish on Lexa's face as she did so was too much for Clarke all of a sudden, and the blonde found that she, too, had to look away, fixing her gaze on a stoic Echo instead whose eyes were slightly narrowed as she watched the Commander carefully now.

After what felt like a few moments too many, the hand on Clarke's cloak fell away, noticeably trembling as the Commander move to clasp the other hand already positioned behind her back. Clarke then watched in her periphery as Lexa finally started forward, her stride noticeably clipped and her steps much more hesitant than usual, the set of her spine excruciatingly rigid - as if she were being forced to trudge through multiple feet of thick sludge and grime against her will.

Clarke had to close her eyes the further Lexa got from her, feeling the growing separation like a physical severance from something vital, something she needed to breathe properly. This was entirely too much for the both of them right now...

It was only the deafening cheer of the crowd gathered in the marketplace as their Commander emerged from the tower that forced Clarke's eyes open, watching as the tail end of Lexa's long coat
disappeared around the corner of the swiftly-closing doors. Clarke felt the metallic click of the large doors into their catch like a jolt somewhere deep in her chest, throwing off the rhythm of her breathing and the frantic beat of her heart.

Too much...

"Are you alright, Klark? You look as if you might be sick...," Echo's obvious concern placated Clarke somewhat, the blonde forcing herself to focus on the warrior before her with great difficulty. The narrow-eyed suspicion intermingled with worry clearly evident in the other girl's eyes gave her plenty to work with, thankfully.

"Just...nervous, I think," Clarke allowed, feeling slightly pleased with herself that she didn't have to spout a full-fledged lie to her warrior.

Echo quirked an eyebrow, a slight smile playing on her lips as she stepped forward and loped her arm through one of Clarke's pulling the blonde further into the hallway. The tower staff still seemed to be struggling with her presence, if their expressions and continued reticence had anything to say for them.

"Understandable," Echo replied, her grin more obvious as she slotted Clarke a glance - clearly having taken the blonde's statement at face value. "Formal introductions can be...intimidating, to say the least... But, rest assured, you have nothing to worry about from the clan leaders, as far as I'm concerned; they were exceptionally impressed with your handling of the assassin - and, dare I say, pleased." Echo looked beyond smug now, clearly oblivious to Clarke's ongoing internal struggle beside her as she guided them to a stop just in front of the tower doors. The sound of the Commander's booming voice over the quiet crowd wafted in slightly muffled, her words indiscernible though radiating power and demanding respect even through the thick slab of metal-lined oak.

Clarke was nearly hyperventilating.

"You'll go out there, walk through the crowd, and join the Commander on stage to watch a dance put together in your honor..." Echo's words were emphatic, the warrior reaching up to gently grab onto Clarke's chin and turn the blonde to meet her gaze. The girl's eyes were significantly softer now, in tune to her queen's struggle despite being somewhat...off-base in her assumptions of its cause. "You are a leader, Clarke - a far better queen than the likes of the clans have seen from any nation for years, in my opinion... You deserve to be celebrated, and I will be by your side until the moment you send me off. You have my word..."

If only it were that simple...

Clarke managed a quivering smile at the sentiment, the corners of her mouth barely lifting as she shrugged Echo's hold on her off and fixed her gaze on the doors in front of her once more. She saw Echo frown slightly in her periphery, the warrior turning her gaze to match her queen's on the door after a moment. A thick silence befell them save for the muffled sounds of Lexa's continued address to the gathered crowd.
"Did something happen? In your private audience with the Commander... Did she - ?" Echo cut herself off with a swallow, seemingly awkward all of a sudden as she struggled to find her question. Clarke's already racing heart leapt into her throat and threatened to suffocate her. "Was there a disagreement? You were alone with her for quite awhile... Roan and I were worried - "

With something like divine mercy intervening, the guards on either side of the door suddenly seemed to respond to some vocal cue from their Commander, grunting a few loose instructions to Clarke in Trigedasleng as Echo dropped her arm back down to her side. Despite being granted reprieve from her warrior's line of questioning, Clarke suddenly found herself on the verge of fainting as the guards forced the doors open, revealing a path cleared and lit by torches leading around a curve to the marketplace.

*Just breathe... One foot in front of the other...*

The first thing Clarke became aware of as she stepped out of the safety of the tower with Echo trailing a step behind was the amount of *people*... Hundreds - probably thousands in total - were clustered on either side of the pathway, their clothes marking origins and occupations from all different sectors of the Commander's territory, every age and walk of life represented in the faces gathered in the capitol - silent save for the scattered cries of infants that echoed through the night at random intervals. The one similarity every individual face bore, though, was an almost identical expression of fascination and intrigue as they appraised the new queen of *Azgeda*, crafting stories and notions of their own as they analyzed her backwards and forwards. Clarke felt every pair of eyes follow her movements like a needle on her bare skin as she walked along the path, forcing as much confidence into her stride as she had stoicism in her mask.

*You can do this... One foot in front of the other... Keep breathing...*

Rounding the slight curve that signified the final stretch to the stage - and *Lexa* -, Clarke took a steadying breath, keeping her eyes trained forward on the blurring faces in the crowd as she moved almost mechanically towards her goal. She couldn't quite catch her breath yet, feeling the need to catch a glimpse of the Commander on that stage more than she'd need a lot of things in recent years -

" *Skai prisa!!*

The familiar voice of a child was all the warning she got before she was suddenly stopped short in her tracks - only just having sighted the stage a few yards ahead -, a force like a vivacious animal crashing into her and causing her to stumble back with a grunt.

Several things happened at once.

A surprised murmur immediately went up in the crowd, widened eyes directed at Clarke as the sounds of hurried footsteps closed in on her from both sides of the pathway. The sound of Echo drawing her sword and grabbing onto Clarke's shoulder from behind should've grabbed her attention, but the blonde found herself wholly enraptured by the small being who'd seemingly latched onto her waist and was now looking up at her in wonder.

*Belou*.

The boy was slightly taller, his dark hair puffed out and sticking in every direction as it framed a face trimmed of some of its baby fat, but still retaining its childlike quality, all the same. His eyes darted
all over her face as if searching for any significant changes to his skai prisa - as if he might actually be able to see the corpses Clarke had left behind simply by looking into her eyes. After a moment, though, Belou seemed overwhelmingly pleased with what he found, as he immediately tightened his arms around her and nuzzled into her hardened stomach like a small kitten.

In that moment, Clarke wasn't the new azplana or a hardened warrior carved by months of torment and solitude; she was just Clarke Griffin, the girl who'd been saved from a pod wreckage by a couple of kids whose existence had baffled her and whose language she hadn't understood. She was just a girl, and she was overwhelmed.

Overwhelmed enough to sweep Belou into her arms the next moment, uncaring of the chorus of shocked gasps and nervous whispers the action sparked in the crowd as she pressed a sloppy kiss to his cheek, loosing an adorable giggle from him as she situated him more comfortably against her. She felt Echo's hand slowly fall away, heard the warrior's sword being sheathed behind her as the guards slowly receded from the path, their expressions wary and disbelieving, their eyes on the boy in Clarke's arms.

It was only as the path in front of her cleared that Clarke noticed a harrowed Nyko breaking through the crowd with Zenya by his side as they came to an abrupt stop at the sight of Belou with the blonde, prompting a few grumbles from surrounding bodies. Their expressions immediately shifted from exasperation to similar masks of shock as Clarke moved towards them, meeting the healer's quickly watering gaze with soft eyes as she brushed a gentle hand along his arm in passing, doing the same on a dazed Zenya as she walked by - as if to express just how incredibly good it was to see them again...

A reinvigorated sense of purpose in her stride, Clarke continued along the path, Belou settled on her hip and nuzzling into her hair as she smiled fondly down at him, choosing to focus solely on him instead of the baffled faces now gawking at her from every direction. After what felt like mere seconds, Clarke looked in front of her again to find the Commander at the edge of the stage before her, eyes immediately locking onto Clarke's as she moved towards her.

It was the breath of air she'd been waiting for.

Looking into those green eyes burning straight through her core like a comet across the night sky, that was what fresh air felt like, tasted like... Though Lexa's face was relatively stoic otherwise, the amount of banked emotion flashing through those bright eyes was enough to knock the wind out of Clarke while simultaneously sating her. There was pride and exuberance, desire and need, and love - so much unadulterated, all-encompassing love that it threatened to knock Clarke right off her feet. It was hard to believe that one look could say so much that words could never manage.

It awakened every nerve-ending in her weighted body, making her wish not for the first time that she and Lexa could just be left alone for awhile - left to re-discover every lost part of their guiding map that promised to be the only thing to lead them home...

Feeling as though she was floating on air all of a sudden, a lightness like nothing else washing over her in waves, Clarke veered left at the end of the pathway and walked to the side of the stage to climb the few steps to the top, Belou still happily clinging to her and Lexa's searing gaze never leaving her face for a moment. After another moment, she was face-to-face with Lexa once more, Echo moving to join the other clan leaders standing in a line a little further back on the stage with the Commander's generals and advisor, Titus, clustered at both ends of the stage in pairs, guarding.
Lexa's eyes finally left Clarke's for a moment to light on Belou, a genuine smile lifting the corners of her mouth slightly as she lightly tapped him on the nose in a gesture of faux-reprimanding, sending a ripple of relieved laughter through the crowd as the boy tucked his face into Clarke's neck in embarrassment. Chuckling softly beneath her breath, the Commander met Clarke's gaze again with something like bliss dancing in her eyes, looking more whole than the blonde had seen her since the moment she'd burst into the throne room all those hours ago.

Clarke could only smile, eyes shimmering with contentment for the first time in a while as she and Lexa turned towards the crowd, watching the on-lookers hurriedly re-arrange themselves to make way for the procession of performers looking to pay tribute to the new queen in the center of the city.

"CLARKE!!"

That was all the warning she got as she made her way to the bottom of the stage steps, distracted by the dispersing of the crowd as they broke into a jubilant - and loud - celebration in the wake of the performance, the Commander lingering behind on the stage to converse with some of the clan leaders looking to catch her attention for a moment. The shout of her name was the only preparation she got for what felt like the force of a freight train slamming into her and Belou, knocking her backwards and onto her ass on the middle step as her senses were bombarded with dark hair and the familiar smell of sulphur and metal. She'd struggled to protect Belou from the force of the sports-like tackle as she went down, grunting with the effort as the two of them found themselves engulfed in a smothering bear hug that probably resembled something like a haphazard dog pile to any onlookers.

"Raven," she breathed, wheezing out a strained chuckle as her chest contracted with emotion, her eyes snapping shut against unwanted tears as the mechanic's body began to shudder on top of hers, muffled sobs reverberating from her friend's chest and into Clarke's.

It was like being bathed in warm sunlight after having spent far too many months in constant shade, too wrapped up in the all-encompassing pleasure of the sensation to register how easy it would be for her to burn up. It was lightness and heaviness all in the same breath, and Clarke didn't really know how to process the swarm of emotions suddenly prickling at the front of her skull as Raven continued to sob into her hair.

She felt a weight on the step above her and opened her eyes, looking up to see Echo staring down at them with a bit of exasperation playing at the edges of her stoic mask - all in good humor, though.

"You're gonna suffocate her, Rae!" The familiar voice of a man called out from somewhere just beyond the steps, intermingled with amusement and raw emotion as it got closer.
Clarke looked beyond Raven's shoulder to the source, breath catching at the sight of her childhood best friend, Wells, looking like something out of an adventure novel with his hair grown out into an unruly afro of sorts and a patchy beard dotting his jawline. He wore the common garb of a Polis healer, a looser long-sleeved tunic overlaying a tighter pair of grey pants and worn boots to suit his figure. He looked more at peace with himself than Clarke had believed he ever had, and she couldn't help the single tear that rolled down her cheek as he fixed her with a look of pure delight and relief, eyes swimming with unshed tears.

Not two seconds later, the Blake siblings appeared on either side of Wells, Lincoln coming up to stand slightly behind Octavia and placing a gentle hand on her shoulder as they all regarded her with similar expressions of expertly-contained emotion, allowing the barest hints of affection and wonder to poke through their facades - every bit the seasoned warriors they were all apparently known to be now. Clarke's breath continued to come and go in spurts beneath Raven's weight as she took in her friends - Octavia with her hair braided like that of a traditional Trikru warrior, sporting a long scar from her temple to sharp jawline similar to Clarke's in color with a beautiful smile warming her features, and Bellamy with his now lengthy dark hair pulled back into a bun, facial hair untrimmed and messy - much shorter than Gustus's - with the makings of a soft smile trapped below watering eyes. Lincoln was ever the same, all thick muscle and beautifully-contained serenity as he looked at her with genuine fondness dancing in his wise eyes.

To see them again like this... It was all entirely too much and not enough at the same time.

"You better have a damn good explanation for me, Griff," Raven exclaimed, pulling back to look at Clarke as she cupped the blonde's face gingerly, forcing the girl's complete attention to her face as she searched for her answers in the depths of oceans blue. Her eyes were wide and frantic as tears continued to stream down her face, wildly searching every visible inch of Clarke for what she desired. "I'm talking epic - like 'The Iliad,' but with more swordplay, ya hear me?"

"Not possible." Bellamy interjected from behind Raven, his gravelly voice oozing levity as he gazed happily at Clarke, watching with bright eyes as she chuckled. "Nothing beats Homer... His works survived hundreds of years of human error and a nuclear apocalypse. You're setting our princess up for failure, really."

"That's queen to you now, sir," Clarke piped up, easily falling back into the comfortable rhythm of banter as her response loosed laughter from Belou and her friends - even a snort from Echo.

"Nah," Bellamy dismissed her cheerfully as Raven collapsed back down onto Clarke, Wells moving to pile onto the mechanic's back and ruffle Belou's hair with a smile. "You'll always be our Sky Princess, Clarke. No amount of badass scars and fancy outfits will ever change that..." He trailed off suddenly, Clarke watching around Raven's and Well's shoulders with confusion as his eyes seemed to lock onto a figure above her head for the first time, lighting in pure enchantment. Clarke strained to force her head up, looking to see a similarly awestruck Echo staring right back at him. Clarke's heart warmed to see it.
"Alright, branwoda, break it up," the unmistakable voice of Anya chided the group, making her way into Clarke's right periphery near Bellamy with a look of near-comical exasperation on her face. "Give the queen some room to breathe... And you wonder why Indra forced you all to stay behind the stage during the performance."

Almost immediately, Clarke felt a weight lifted from her chest as Wells got up and pulled Raven with him, the mechanic whining in protest as she made to grab for Clarke again. Smirking, Clarke placed Belou in her arms instead, the boy instantly latching his arms around her disgruntled friend's neck as the blonde snorted at the death glare she was being given. If there's one thing that'd remained the same over the course of the last year, it was Raven's supreme aversion to anything below a certain age and height marker.

Everything is different yet entirely the same...

"Now run off and make yourselves useful somewhere - drink yourselves into a stupor for all I care," Anya commanded, tone somehow managing to be unyielding and simultaneously annoyed. "Just get out of my sight."

With that, Bellamy ushered Raven and Belou away with Wells, Octavia, and Lincoln by his side, all six of them shooting questioning glances over their shoulders at varying intervals as they receded from view and into the vibrant crowd of the party, leaving Clarke somewhat dazed on the steps with Echo standing above her - still staring in the direction of her retreating friends. Clarke smirked again, pushing herself to her feet as she turned to look at her warrior.

"I shouldn't be needing your assistance for the rest of the night... Do try and find Roan when you can, though. I'd hate to think what would happen if he got ahold of the pub whisky," Clarke dropped her voice and leaned forward a little bit, expression conspiratorial as she whispered, "His name is Bellamy, by the way."

Turning on her heels and leaving a stunned Echo staring after her from the steps, Clarke made her way over to a watching Anya, nodding her greeting as she wordlessly followed the warrior to a less crowded area behind the stage.

It was odd being back in Polis after all this time, the many shacks and merchant set-ups in an unfamiliar arrangement even with her knowledge of the changes made for the festival. A feeling of aching nostalgia settled over Clarke as she walked with Anya to sit on a stone bench tucked away a good few yards behind the stage, the seat situated between two idle carts left uncovered despite the festival.

There seemed to be a superficial barrier between the noise of the celebration beyond the stage and where Clarke sat beside a pensive Anya, the joyful raucous muffled by slight distance as it reached their ears. Clarke tipped her head back to stare up into the vast dusting of stars stretching endlessly in either direction, and her heart gave a painful thud as she felt Anya's piercing stare burning into her profile as she continued to play oblivious.

Too much...
"You're different," the warrior stated, as plainly as if she were commenting on the color of the sky or the texture of the bench they sat upon. Clarke forced her gaze back down to meet Anya's, flinching slightly under the probing intensity of it. "Almost like...almost as if your soul has been tempered - like a glass lid placed over an open candle, the flame forced to accommodate the lack... It's...disconcerting, to say the least."

That was the very last thing she ever expected to hear from Anya's mouth, and she gaped at the warrior for a few moments before schooling her expression beneath a delicate mask - though still feeling so incredibly exposed beside the fierce woman who continued to unabashedly scan her face.

Clarke cleared her throat, staring down at her hands as she clasped them tightly in her lap, uncomfortable.

"I...suppose that's one way to look at it, yes," Clarke responded softly, her voice gravelly from so much left unsaid. "I guess that's what happens when you survive a year full of 're-programming' from Nia, right?"

She hadn't meant for it to slip out like that, but it did. Clarke closed her eyes immediately, bracing herself and feeling more than seeing the storm cloud of rage curling its way to the surface above Anya's head.

"A year of what?! What did she do to you, Clarke? What happened?!” The words were punctuated with anger, all hot air and blunt force, and Clarke winced, moving to scrub her hands down her face in something close to exasperation at her slip-up. This was not the right time for such stories...

"Can we just..." Clarke trailed off, dropping her hands back into her lap as she opened her eyes again, fixing Anya with a pleading look as the warrior breathed harshly through a kind of white-hot anger that'd completely contorted her face. "Not now, okay? Not tonight ... I don't think I can - I don't want to think about it for awhile... Not if I don't have to. I've worked so hard to move past it, I just... I have a long way to go. And it's too much to handle along with everything else, so just... not now..."

The exhaustion in her words, the amount unspoken yet blatantly obvious anguish there... That must've been enough. Enough to get Anya to look away for a moment, taking deep, steadying breaths as she attempted to school her expression beneath a more calm exterior once more. Clarke waited, watching the cloud dissipate far slower than it'd come with immense relief unfurling in her chest.

Not tonight...

For awhile after that, the two of them just sat there, both staring straight ahead as they seemed to exist in a pocket outside of the confines of time and space, privy to the musings of the stars and secrets of the universe in a place where anything could be possible. It was quiet companionship in its purest and most unabridged form, and Clarke felt it settling deep within her weary bones like a sealant to the cracks and breaks.

Too much and not enough...
"She's different, too," Anya spoke much more quietly now, her voice almost as close to a gentle musing as it could get, her head tipped back to fix her far-off gaze into the endless galaxies above them. "I didn't realize... I didn't know how much you meant to her, not until after..." She trailed off, brows furrowing slightly as she was suddenly immersed in troubling memories. Clarke simply watched her struggle, entranced and apprehensive in the same breath.

"I thought I knew how to handle it - that it would be like before, with...with Costia..." She struggled slightly with the name, bringing her head down to stare straight ahead of her, unseeing. "But, this was different... This was... devastating."

Clarke closed her eyes, feeling the heaviness of her body returning to her for the first time since the dance - her brief reprieve from reality, it seemed. There was something so haunting about Anya's tone, and Clarke dreaded what would inevitably be revealed to her - how deeply she'd managed to cut the one whose pain felt like a more unbearable version of her own.

"It was as if she was the one that'd died that day on the Maun-de, and I didn't know what to do... I didn't know how to care for someone who looked as if they'd lost the soul burning beneath their eyes, the better part of them severed from their grasp forever... That's when I knew." Clarke opened her eyes then, chancing a glance at the warrior who was now looking at her as if she were the seventh wonder of the world, and it was far too much to swallow.

"That's when I knew what you were to her... Not just a lover, but a part of her - more vital to survival than, perhaps, any other. I'd never seen anything like it... Raven called it 'soulmates,' but I'm not sure how I feel about the term. It seems inadequate for what you two are to each other..."

As stunning as Anya's words were, Clarke couldn't help but notice the way the warrior's eyes had softened to an impossible degree at the mention of the mechanic. At the quirk of Clarke's eyebrow, Anya huffed in displeasure, looking away from the blonde and staring straight ahead of her once more with a scowl on her face.

"You've missed a lot in this past year, I'll say that much... Tell anyone where my affections lie, and I will slit your throat before you even have the chance to blink - Coalition be damned, Azplana."

Clarke threw her head back and laughed - a loud, chortling sort of thing -, and was pleased when Anya's more quiet chuckles filled the air beside her. It was all just too much...

Everything is different yet entirely the same...

"I wouldn't dream of doing such a thing, Anya," Clarke assured the girl after her laughter had died down, the odd burst of happiness suddenly leaving her much more quickly than it'd appeared, rendering her slightly breathless and out of sorts as she met the warrior's curious gaze on her once more. She'd forgotten how attuned Anya was to every little nuance...

Clearing her throat a little awkwardly, Clarke sighed, clasping her fingers together and positioning her forearms on her thighs in a way that allowed her to slump in a manner most unbefitting of a queen - her quiet rebellion against her position.

"Is she..." Clarke swallowed, struggling around the lump in her throat as she felt Anya's gaze burning into her profile once more. "Is she...alright? I mean, she didn't even recognize me at first, and I... What happened while I was gone, Anya? What happened to her?" Clarke looked at the warrior
again and watched as the woman's shoulders visibly deflated, a bone weary sigh loosing from her lips as she stared straight ahead of her again, pointedly avoiding Clarke's gaze.

The next moment, though, Anya was perking up again, a soft smile stretching across her features as she seemed to see something in the distance that pleased her.

"Ask her yourself."

At that, Clarke's head whipped around, heart plummetsing to the depths of her very core at the sight of Lexa, outlined in torchlight as she was, making her way towards the pair with an anxiousness coloring her steps. As soon as her eyes locked onto Clarke's, though - drawn like magnets as they were -, she stopped in her tracks, lips parting in wonderstruck awe at the sight of the blonde's figure cutting a silhouette in the moonlight.

The look they shared... It - like every look between the two of them up until this very moment - created worlds, crafting entire existences and realities yet to be experienced out of a cosmic-sized clash of green and blue. It built Clarke up while simultaneously tearing her limb from limb, and it was everything - everything she'd ever hoped for, dreamed of, and imagined love to be.

It was all in that single look.

As Anya got up from the bench, respectfully inclining her head to Lexa in passing as she made her way back towards the crowd, Clarke was stuck on a single word, watching helplessly as Lexa began a slow and steady walk towards her, promise in every step. With so much left unsaid - with so much pain left to be felt -, Clarke couldn't help but cling to it, let it guide her towards the oblivion in which she'd begged to exist over the past year of her life...

Soulmates.
Do I sense that much-needed Clexa talk coming up? (; also, I'm a sucker for Clarke and Anya scenes if you can't tell...
Hope that chapter lived up to expectations!! There's sooo much more to come, and I'm gonna do my best to do some justice to the plotlines I've been crafting in my head for quite some time now... Expect Ark dealings, Azgeda!Clarke, Grounders galore, my version of an origin story, and, of course, tons of CLEXA!!
Thoughts, comments, concerns? Let's chat (:}
Merry (late) Christmas and a Happy New Year to you and yours!! Who's as ready to end this dumpster fire of a year as I am? So much loss, so much devastation - but, without the shadows, how would we know when we look upon the light? Anywaaaays, this chapter is mostly feels with some intermingled bouts of plot. Just some hints of what's to come...

Without further ado, here is Chapter 4! Hope you enjoy (:  

"Clarke."

It was a mesmerizing whisper, as reverent as the most sacred of prayers, and Clarke reveled in it. The promise behind her name, the adoration she detected in even the smallest of breaths... It would've been enough to heal even the most fatal of wounds to the soul.

As Lexa made her way over to where Clarke remained seated on the solitary bench, the blonde finds that she can do nothing more than stare, eyes wide and glistening in the pale moonlight as she watches the Commander's elegant approach. It's a slow, careful sort of movement, the kind that gives the impression of one closing in on a remarkably delicate creature - one they believe might disappear should they move too suddenly. It's as calming as it is tragic, and Clarke can't help the watering of her eyes as she allows the pang in her chest to blossom within her lungs. Again, she's struck by the sobering realization of the turmoil her absence had wrought in Lexa, of the undeniable agony the girl had been forced to endure to the extent of which Clarke still didn't know - couldn't even begin to comprehend in her current state.

Too much...

Drawing her back to reality like the echoing snap of fingers in a vacuum null of sound, Lexa came to a stop mere inches from Clarke's legs, her eyes never having left the blonde's once - always searching, ever piercing from within their outline of warpaint. Then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world - as if the action, itself, didn't contradict every single conceivable expectation of her position -, the Commander sunk to her knees before Clarke, her torso brushing against the front of the blonde's legs as she sought to nullify any space between them. The look in Lexa's eyes...

The force of it was like the crack of a whip across bare skin - something that had Clarke gasping for breath as her spine fought against the sudden urge to concave beneath the pressure. It was
reminiscent of a different time, a relic of another era - a time in which Lexa had fallen to her knees to swear fealty to Clarke in a fit of passion, a roundabout declaration of love and loyalty; a mere prelude to the night that'd sealed their fate beneath the arching of backs on dampened sheets, whispers of ecstasy and immeasurable pleasure carved into the very lexicon from which they would look to draw their purpose. Much like the night of the festival all those months ago, Lexa was looking at her as if Clarke, alone, had carved the very stars in the sky from the specs of light reflected in her irises around a kaleidoscope of blue. She looked at Clarke as if she was the master of that same universe, the most immaculate conception of goddesses long-gone. Lexa looked as if she'd been granted the opportunity to look upon the keeper of her heart, the guardian of her most sacred desires, and it was blinding ...

Before Clarke could even hope to have gathered her thoughts enough to react, Lexa was reaching out, sliding her hands up Clarke's thighs, over her hips, and around her waist until they met around the blonde's back, capturing her in an unbreakable hold that erased any sliver of space between them. The next moment, Lexa leaned down, placing her left cheek over the space where the blonde's thighs pressed together, effectively resting her head in Clarke's lap with her hair spilling across the girl's legs in long braided tendrils like a halo.

Clarke was stunned, irrevocably and utterly speechless.

For the Commander to render herself so incredibly vulnerable in such a way, the girl who supposedly bowed before no one sinking so easily to her knees to essentially cuddle the new Queen of Azgeda - in public, no less -, was just...something close to inconceivable. Though they were the only souls who dared to wander beyond the boundary of the main stage at this point in the night, the fact that anyone could simply stumble upon the two of them like this at any given moment was enough to cause Clarke's already racing heart to thunder in her chest, the back of her neck prickling with something akin to panic at the thought.

And, yet...

Despite the potential disaster that would inevitably unfold should anyone find them this way - find the Commander legitimately turned to mush before the newest clan leader, the epitome of weakness in an unintentional display of favoritism -, Clarke didn't move. She couldn't bring herself to do anything, really, other than attempt to regain control of the motor skills she'd seemed to have lost somewhere between the time that Lexa had started walking towards her and now... The more seconds that passed, though, the more Clarke realized just how much she didn't care at this point.

There would always be another problem to solve, another evil or injustice to fight to the tooth-and-nail - and they would both do so until their very dying breaths, that was assured. But, this kind of moment - one in which the world, itself, seemed to stop spinning in favor of creating an alternate universe for the two of them, alone, to exist in - was as rare as innocence was easily lost in their current reality. This was the kind of moment that set the parameters for what pure bliss felt like, the benchmark against which every subsequent moment would be weighed to see how well it measured up.

This moment was theirs, and Clarke would be damned if she was going to let it be ruined by something as comparably inconsequential as responsibility.

Let them come...
Giving in to the sweetest rebellion Clarke had ever known, she leaned forward, adjusting her torso somewhat so that she could more comfortably rest her head on Lexa's, more easily wrap her arms around the girl's mid-back. Closing her eyes, Clarke reveled in the familiar scent of lavender, earth, and smoke always present in Lexa's hair, the silky ends of the brunette's locks that curled so perfectly around her fingertips. The sigh of pure contentment that Lexa loosed upon feeling her embrace returned would've been enough to sate Clarke for days.

"Does the all-powerful Commander typically snuggle with every new clan leader at their introduction ceremony?" Clarke asked quietly, her voice barely more than a whisper but containing unhidden fondness underlying her gentle teasing.

Lexa chuckled softly, her torso vibrating slightly against Clarke's legs, hands absentmindedly rubbing gentle circles into the small of the blonde's back - blissful.

"Only the pretty ones," Lexa responded just as quietly, tone lilting with obvious levity, sounding as if she would quite literally be content to remain in this position - in this softer version of reality - for as long as Clarke would allow. Clarke's laugh mirrored Lexa's gentle lilt, the blonde feeling light as a feather for the first time in recent memory despite the grounding weight on her lap.

It felt as though it would be possible for the two of them to find themselves again, if only they could stay this way for a little while longer...

They continued their quiet embrace for immeasurable moments more, breathing each other in and reveling in the comfort of their most sacred companionship. Lexa's hands unhooked from behind Clarke's back, slid over the blonde's hips, and moved down to rest mid-way on the girl's thighs, framing her hair where it haloed out. Clarke hummed at the movement, her fingertips scratching lightly into Lexa's scalp as the girl turned a little to press a chaste kiss above the blonde's clothed knee. It was enough to send a bolt of electricity straight through the blonde's core, and she reveled in it all the same.

"I missed you."

It sounded like a confession, quiet and sobering as it escaped Lexa's lips, weighted with words unsaid and stories untold. Clarke didn't have to ask why, or for how long - the statement was as all-encompassing as the feelings they currently found themselves immersed in, and she somehow knew exactly what Lexa meant.

The inadequacy of words overwhelming her once more, Clarke slowly sat up, drawing Lexa's head off her lap to look at her in the same motion, their movements like marionettes on a shared string. The look was back in Lexa's eyes - the one that was entirely scraped raw, reflecting the soul of one in the midst of a most excruciating bout of inner turmoil -, and Clarke couldn't bear it for a single moment longer.

Gently - painstakingly so -, Clarke moved to place a single finger beneath Lexa's chin, drawing the girl's face up to hers so that she could press their lips together in a kiss that spoke of utmost
tenderness, unmatchable longing. The sharp intake of breath followed by a quiet whimper in the back of Lexa's throat as soon as their lips met told Clarke everything she needed to know, and she couldn't help the way her lips curled slightly upward into the kiss as she felt Lexa's fingers digging into the meat of her thighs - the only outward betrayal of the intense desire she constantly kept hidden beneath the rigid facade of the Commander.

It was a euphoric sort of kiss, interwoven with bursts of passion like the nip of teeth and the drag of tongues across supple bottom lips, soothed by quiet displays of adoration and tenderness like the stroke of thumbs across cheekbones and the catch of smiles against yielding forces. If perfection was a quantifiable entity that could've been conquered and obtained, the two of them would've been crowned the victors of every definitive measure of possession through the brush of lips, alone.

*I'm here... I'm not leaving you.*

*I love you.*

Forced from her blissful haze by the inconsequential need to breathe and the omnipresent prickle of responsibility at the back of her neck, Clarke broke the kiss first and leaned back, a soft smile spreading across her swollen lips as Lexa whined in displeasure and leaned in to chase the blonde's lips back to her own. Looking down into a face still rearranged in wanton desire and unadulterated pleasure, at the darting eyes widened with desperation at the thought of losing such a feeling, Clarke leaned forward slightly to press a placating kiss to the tip of Lexa's nose, delighting in the contented sigh it aroused from the brunette whose eyes fluttered closed once more at the sensation. Resting her forehead against Lexa's, Clarke loosed a quiet sigh of her own at the way her chest blossomed with warmth over the possessive hands that'd anchored themselves on her hips, unmoving.

"As much as I'd love nothing more than to send any random passerby into cardiac arrest at the sight of their *Heda* and the new *Azplana* making out," Clarke began, tone gentle and slightly breathless with lingering embers of passion, "I don't know if that's the kind of first impression I want to be making here..." She trailed off, relishing the quiet laughter that shook against her as the hands on her hips squeezed a little tighter.

"You've always had such a way with words, *ai Klark,*" Lexa breathed, tone dripping with unadulterated affection as she leaned in to press a sweet kiss to Clarke's lips.

The next moment, Lexa was sitting back on her heels and rising gracefully to her feet, somehow having managed to grasp onto Clarke's hands in the process to pull the blonde up with her. Almost mindlessly, Lexa wove their fingers together between them, the hidden smile that Clarke adored so much playing at her lips as her eyes danced with a beautiful sort of tenderness shining in the moonlight, appearing to silently memorize the blonde's face for what felt like the hundredth time that day - the juggernaut of an event it'd been thus far...

Feeling slightly bashful beneath such unyielding reverence, Clarke looked down at her feet, shuffling a little bit closer to Lexa as the other girl leaned in to place a light kiss to the crown of her head. Clarke blushed further, gaze still directed towards the ground.

"Shall we grace the people of Polis with your presence, *Azplana?*" Lexa questioned, her voice light and dancing with barely-veiled joy - a welcome contrast to the emptiness and anguish of before.
Ever-so-gently, a calloused hands cupped Clarke's cheek and lifted her gaze upwards to meet luminous green filled with silent questions. Clarke smiled, helpless to do anything but place her hand over Lexa's where it continued to caress her cheek.

"Only if you take me to the baker's cart and sample the pastries with me," Clarke whispered, feeling suddenly overwhelmed by the butterflies fluttering within her stomach at the sheer proximity to Lexa's lips. The look of pure devotion warming Lexa's eyes to an impossible degree at the request didn't do much to placate them, either.

With a sweet smile stretching across her full lips, Lexa slid her hand down Clarke's arm to tangle their fingers together, pulling the blonde towards the muffled sounds of the festival that only just seemed to make themselves known again.

"As you wish, Clarke."

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

"Okay, this is so much better than I remembered... Good god."

Clarke's words were slightly garbled by the warm pastry in her mouth, the sweetness of the tart bursting over her tongue like the first flower blossoming in the springtime. Everything from the slightly buttery crust to the fresh mixed berry filling had the blonde's eyes nearly rolling back in her head with her eyelids fluttering shut, and she couldn't help the small moan of ecstasy that escaped around the bite.

A moment later, Clarke opened her eyes to see Lexa far too close to her in such a public place, slightly blown pupils devouring the shining emeralds trained on the blonde's mouth, her full lips parted to intake sharply. Struggling around the sudden lump in her throat, Clarke gulped the last of the tart down, unable to ignore the rigid set of Lexa's frame as the girl appeared to be quite literally warring with her inner desire to kiss the remaining crumbs from the edge of the blonde's mouth or something equally as stupid.

Clearing her throat against the sudden heat pounding across every inch of her skin, Clarke turned away from Lexa slightly, focusing a pointedly polite gaze on the head baker who'd been watching expectantly from behind his cart as the new Azplana sampled his creation, nerves vibrating off of him.
"These were always my favorite," she confided to him softly, her voice somehow still discernible over the noisy din all around them. "I could never describe the recipe to Hera without missing something... I'll have to send her to you sometime in the future so she can learn from the master."

The old man blushed profusely, averting his gaze and shuffling his feet at the compliment.

Once again, Clarke was struck by how incredibly strange it was to be back in the city... Here she was, talking to the man whose shop she and Raven had once ruined in the northern quarter while his apprentices were away, allotting a block of time in the future during which her personal chef - the best cook in all of Azgeda - could take some time off to come to Polis and learn how to bake.

_A strange reality, indeed...

Momentarily distracted by the surreal reality of it all, Clarke look the chance to take in her surroundings, hyper-aware of the Commander beside her whose shoulder she nearly brushed as she turned to gaze out over the marketplace. She could feel the intensity of Lexa's gaze searing into her profile, the warmth radiating off of her body in waves, and Clarke couldn't help the accidental brush of her fingertips against the brunette's as they stood side by side - both of them clearly aching to profess the depth of their affection through all manner of public displays, both knowing just how unwise that would be given the inevitable complications that would follow such an act. Clarke could only hope that any onlookers were too immersed in the celebration to notice just how doting the Commander was being towards the new Azplana...

The way they moved so carelessly in each other's personal space, the uninhibited longing and potent desire underlying every stolen glance, the sharp intake of breath from both girls at the mere hint of a skin-to-skin collision - it would've been enough to stimulate curiosity in even the most oblivious of observers. Not to mention, the ferocious protectiveness that was detectable in the Commander's every movement, every look directed towards Clarke - how she hovered mere inches behind the blonde's back at all times, fingers twitching instinctually towards the handle of her blade every time a random passerby would get too close to Clarke for her liking... It was as reassuring as it was disarming, and the omnipresent cloud of dread above Clarke's head seemed to darken and rumble more ominously as the night wore on.

For, if Lexa was this overly-protective in such a circumstance, merely subjugate to the lingering remnants of the vicious maelstrom that'd wrought havoc within the very depths of the girl's soul upon Clarke's return that now drove her to shield, to keep safe, how would she react once she actually knew the truth? How would she feel once Clarke told her of her year with Nia in Azgeda, of the way the woman had all but quashed the fire that'd always burned so brightly behind her eyes, of the torment that'd rendered Clarke the abhorrent murderer she was now? Surely, Lexa had seen that the fire was no longer present - or, as Anya had put it, tempered-, as she was always so adept at seeing the purest version of truth hidden within the endless depths of Clarke's eyes.

But, to know _why_ that fire had been extinguished - that was another thing, entirely.

Seeing the way Lexa was with her now - the delicate tenderness that was entirely too much and not enough at the same time; the raw anguish she inflicted upon herself for her perceived failures whenever she thought Clarke wasn't looking; the way she would catch the blonde's eyes every so often with a look that was something like silent begging, writhing, and _screaming_ with her need to affirm Clarke's existence anew, to make sure that the blonde wouldn't just disappear into the
merciless void once more... Simply put, it made contemplation of Lexa's reaction to the impending confession beyond unfathomable.

What have I done to you?

A gentle nudge to her left shoulder had Clarke shaking herself from her troubling revery, her eyes having glazed over in the shadow of the cloud lingering far too closely above, rendering her previous attempt to gauge her surroundings unsuccessful. Turning to look at the source, Clarke was met with an expression of utmost concern, the Commander's brows furrowed over eyes still framed by stark warpaint that danced with unspoken inquiries and obvious worry for the blonde that'd gone nearly-catatonic beside her.

"Are you alright, Clarke?" Lexa asked softly, her tone betraying the depth of her concern as her fingertips ghosted over Clarke's that'd remained limp by her side, clearly aiming to provide any comfort she could. Clarke managed a soft smile and a small nod, the fingers of her left hand catching to squeeze around Lexa's for the briefest of moments before moving to clasp both hands in front of her, working her shoulders back.

Breathe, Griffin... Breathe. Don't overthink. Just be here with her... That's all that matters right now.

That's all that can matter.

The sound of familiar bellowing laughter drew Clarke's attention forward once more, breaking the crackling intensity of her and Lexa's shared gaze to search for the source in the crowd that the blonde felt she was only just now seeing for the first time.

Sure enough, off to the right side of the marketplace at the archery set-up with a small gathering of onlookers surrounding them, Raven and Anya stood with a bucket of arrows between them, the mechanic doubled over in laughter as the warrior waved her bow around furiously, gesturing empathically towards the arrow that'd only just managed to miss the bullseye of the target some yards away from them. A smile splitting across her face at the sight, Clarke looked past Raven to notice Wells in the crowd of onlookers, Belou hanging from his shoulders like a spider monkey, both boys grinning like fools at the spectacle before them, Nyko and Zenya wearing similar expressions beside them. Jax and Isa were huddled near the pelt display on the far side of the market, immersed in the sight and feel of it all.

A little ways behind the chaotic melee of celebration stood Lincoln and Octavia in a more sparsely crowded area, talking closely with eyes only for each other as their hands intermingled between them. Clarke's heart warmed to see affectionate display, but it also ached - ached to be able to do the same with the girl standing much too close to her still, ached with the ever-present burden of responsibility that'd pressed the heels of hers and Lexa's boots further into the impressionable soil beneath them than should've been humanly possible, ached for the reality of a life full of easy devotion that she might not ever know...

"They seem to be getting on well," Lexa spoke up from beside her once more, drawing Clarke's
attention with a slight nod of her head towards the crowd of dancing bodies a few feet in front of them. The wry amusement in her tone peaked Clarke's curiosity, and the moment her eyes locked onto the pair to whom the Commander referred, the blonde felt her jaw nearly unhinge.

Sandwiched between far too many people to be comfortable just inside the fringes of the group moving in time to the music were Bellamy and Echo, the Azgeda warrior's back pressed to the boy's front as they maintained a sultry grind to the rhythm of the drums. They were both dripping with sweat, clearly enraptured with one another, and Clarke had to cough back a laugh at the absolute ridiculousness of it their current circumstance - of how starkly and startlingly it contrasted with every expectation she thought she'd had of this night.

Too much and not enough...

"I wish...," Clarke started, trailing off as a sudden wave of melancholy knocked her train of thought careening off its tracks, overwhelming in its intensity.

She turned towards Lexa, meeting the girl's questioning gaze that was at once memorizing her features while silently encouraging her to continue. Clarke sighed, feeling her cloak weighing down on her shoulders much more noticeably now, hanging her head slightly to study the cobblestone beneath her feet.

"I just - I know it's not... Well, I guess I just...wish that that could be us somehow, I..." It came out much more of a broken whisper than she'd intended, and Clarke immediately closed her eyes, feeling the unwelcome pooling of tears threatening to undermine her position.

Before she could dwell on the implications of her words, the hidden meaning and the impossibilities laden with every syllable, Clarke felt a gentle yet insistent finger hook beneath her chin and pull her gaze upward, causing the blonde's breath to catch in her throat at the pure boldness of such an action in such a public place. Despite everything, Clarke could see the flame of passionate intensity burning within the solemn emeralds that seared into the very depths of her core, seeping through every protective layer the blonde could've attempted to put up.

"Have you no recollection of your dance lessons with me, ai Klark?" Lexa inquired quietly, a layer of levity masking the true sadness detectable in every word, every movement of her eyes between Clarke's. "As I recall, I do believe I was promised a - how did you say - waltz lesson some time ago..."

The secret smile that lifted a corner of Lexa's full lips, the way that she seemed to know exactly what to say, how to quiet the storm brewing inside of Clarke with only a few words... For those things - and so much more -, Clarke would be eternally grateful.

Grateful, awestruck, overwhelmed, and so incredibly, terribly, in love...

Before Clarke could do something reckless and stupid like crash her lips to Lexa's in full view of their subjects, the sound of a throat clearing not too far in front of them had Clarke's head whipping around, her expression still somewhat glazed over and heated from what she'd been about to do. She felt more than saw Lexa go rigid beside her, any lightness immediately forgotten as the facade of the Commander fell into place once more, the girl's fingers gripping onto the handle of her long sword in
something like a precautionary measure.

Standing before them now was a man most likely in his mid-twenties, electrifying blues staring out of a chiseled face framed by hair so blonde it was nearly white. A dark tattoo curled over his brow and down his temple to mid-cheekbone, and he wore an elaborate uniform similar to that of a Trikru warrior's, but with colors and fabrics Clarke had never seen before. His features were nothing short of striking, and Clarke had to fight back the slight shiver of unease she felt upon looking at him, the man resembling something of a silver ghost in the pale moonlight.

"Tarek of Blue Cliff," the Commander spoke up, addressing the man in a tone clipped with utmost formality. Lexa's hand was still noticeably resting around the handle of her sword, and Clarke didn't miss the way the girl's right shoulder seemed to angle slightly in front of the blonde's body as he stepped closer to them. "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

The man, Tarek, smiled crookedly, inclining his head in a respectful gesture to the Commander before fixing his shockingly light blue eyes on Clarke's face, hands clasped behind his back with impeccable posture to suit. She had to fight the sudden urge to shrink back beneath the probing intensity of his gaze that began a lascivious descent over her curves.

"I've come to make my first impression upon the newest clan leader to join our ranks, of course," he responded, voice as smooth and soft as velvet, eyes dancing with some hidden joy Clarke couldn't even begin to fathom as he appraised her still. Clarke shot a questioning glance in the Commander's direction, noting how the girl seemed to be following even the smallest of movements from Tarek with the attention of a predator eyeing the jugular of its prey through narrowed vision, and her hackles rose almost instantly.

"Tarek took his father's place as head of Blue Cliff prior to last year's celebratory gathering of the Coalition leaders," Lexa informed the blonde, somehow knowing how to answer the unspoken question in Clarke's eyes despite never having removed her murderous gaze from Tarek. At this, though, the Commander finally looked over, meeting Clarke's gaze with a starkly neutral expression - though with an undercurrent of intensity demanding to be questioned in a more private setting - as she continued.

"His father had been closely... allied with Nia for the previous two winters, and Tarek was responsible for leading the small faction of warriors within Blue Cliff that saw to his demise in the interests of their people and peace, at large..." The way Lexa spoke of Nia's allegiance with Blue Cliff, it was almost as if - no, that couldn't be... Had Nia and Tarek's father been lovers?

"As Nia didn't take too kindly to such a coup, she cut ties with Blue Cliff upon Tarek's ascension and posted soldiers at the shared border with Azgeda, preventing any further trade from occurring through the use of any means necessary."

Lessa swallowed, her stoic mask flickering for a moment before directing her gaze back to Tarek, expression noticeably darker now as her hand remained clasped around the handle of her sword. "The makeshift embargo put a significant strain on Blue Cliff's general population, and there was many a time in which Tarek was forced to negotiate matters of supply redistribution across the boundaries of Shallow Valley and Rock Line - a clan which, I might add, also happened to have the unfortunate burden of a shared border with Nia's kingdom..."
"Which is why it will come as no surprise to anyone that I am exceptionally delighted by Azgeda's recent turnover in leadership," Tarek finished for her, barely managing to avoid cutting the Commander off as he stepped closer to Clarke, offering up his right arm in the typical gesture of greeting of the Ground.

Doing her best to ignore the flex of Lexa's jaw in her periphery at the clan leader's borderline disrespectful behavior, Clarke stepped forward hastily, extending her hand to clasp Tarek's just below the elbow as he did the same to hers. His eyes hadn't ceased their lazy probing of her figure, and Clarke could feel the uneasy prickle at the back of her neck transforming into a much more potent urge to make the adjustments necessary to dislocate his shoulder from its socket.

"You and I have much to discuss, Klark Kom Azgeda," Tarek murmured, his voice lowered to be detectable to Clarke's ears alone. To hear herself addressed in such a way still felt so... wrong on top of everything else that unnerved her about his presence. "Let us hope that we will have half the relationship my father had with your predecessor - to a much more mutually beneficial end, of course..."

He trailed off with a slightly mischievous waggle of his brow, and Clarke felt her stomach plummet with intermingled dread and disgust.

Oh, no... Did he really - ? He couldn't possibly be suggesting that they -?

Before Clarke could even hope to find her voice through all of the prickling discomfort and urge to attack overwhelming her, Tarek was releasing her arm and stepping back, inclining his head to the Commander once more before spinning on his heels and disappearing into the crowd - not before throwing Clarke a gratuitous wink, though.

Standing with her mouth slightly agape - and realizing that she hadn't even managed to get a word in before he'd departed -, Clarke stared blankly off in the direction he'd gone, a million thoughts flashing through her mind all at once echoing sentiments of sharp foreboding mixed with hints of a more subtle sort of resignation. After all, her kingdom did still share a border with Blue Cliff and, unless something... unexpected were to happen to Tarek in the near future, Clarke would most likely be seeing a lot more of him than she'd ever be able to stomach -

"I shall be present at every audience he demands with you," Lexa's frigid voice vowed from directly beside Clarke, startling the blonde with her sudden proximity and the amount of uninhibited ferocity laced in every word, "and he will never be allowed to seek private council with you unless at least two of your guards are present to bear witness... I should slit his throat for even daring to look upon you in such a way - "

"Lexa," Clarke admonished softly, moving to brush her fingertips lightly over the girl's hand that still remained white-knuckled around the handle of her sword. She worked as much softness into her expression as she could manage, somewhat alarmed by the amount of sheer savagery present within the hardened emeralds of Lexa's gaze.

"He's not worth it. Plus, you and I both know I'm more than capable of handling his kind... And,
besides - " Clarke leaned into Lexa, smirking slightly at the immediately-sobering effect her proximity had over the fuming Commander.

"The last time I checked, I was already taken."

Her words softened Lexa almost entirely, the girl's hand falling away from her sword and making as if to take Clarke's hand in hers before catching herself. The previously steeled emeralds of her eyes went nearly liquified, dancing with undeniable adoration as she regarded the blonde beside her. Most likely in the hopes of avoiding making too much of a sappy display of herself, the Commander turned away from Clarke to face the crowd, expression stoic though bursting with lightness at every seam, a slightly smug smile dancing at the corners of her mouth.

There you are... I knew I'd found you.

Moments later, a deliciously sweet sort of smell wafted to Clarke's nose in the comfortable silence that befell them, and her feet immediately turned to follow the scent upon instinct without so much as a glance in Lexa's direction. As predicted, the Commander was right at her heels, always towing the line of too close and not near enough for Clarke's liking - though, somewhat more questionable in the public arena they currently found themselves in, she'd admit.

The two of them wove their way through hordes of drunken festival-goers - some of whom stopped both Clarke and their Commander to pay respects - , ambling over to a crowded cart adorned with some of the finest desserts in all of the capital, many of which the old baker had obviously assisted in creating. Upon seeing the two leaders approaching, the small crowd gathered around the merchant cleared a path for the new Azplana and their Heda, expressions somewhat awestruck at their leaders' proximity.

Clarke worked her shoulders back, putting on her best stoic facade as she sidled up to the younger woman gawking at her from behind the cart.

"Looking to sooth your sweet tooth, Griff?" Raven's familiar voice, wry with amusement, called to her from slightly off to the left of the cart. Clarke turned her head, grinning slightly to see the mechanic approaching with Anya in tow, her eyes light as she appraised her friend - still looking somewhat wonderstruck and a little more than haunted to see the blonde before her eyes, though. The two women came to a stop beside Clarke and Lexa, both casting respectful glances in their Heda's direction.

"What is this so-called 'sweet tooth' she speaks of?" came Lexa's soft voice from just behind the shell of the blonde's left ear, tone gentle and lilting for Clarke, alone. The blonde looked over her shoulder, expression softening impossibly as she prepared to answer the almost-childlike inquiry, when she was suddenly stopped mid-breath.

Clarke froze, eyes going wide as she struggled to comprehend what was happening.

It couldn't possibly be right. She couldn't possibly be hearing -

Ringing. High-pitched and keening, cutting through the air dense with noise like a beam of sound
straight through Clarke's eardrums, as clear as if it were being sounded right above her head.

*No... No, this can't be happening. I destroyed it... I burned it along with her body...*

*No, no, no, no, no...*

*It can't be -*

Nia's bell.

She felt Lexa go rigid with alarm behind her at Clarke's sudden change of demeanor, felt the girl's hand squeeze her shoulder as if to gain her attention, heard the sound of her name falling from multiple pairs of lips - but none of that mattered anymore...

*Nia's bell.*

Clapping her hands over her ears, Clarke fell to her knees with a scream.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Let's call this my version of a catalyst for much-needed conversation (;
I'll do my best to answer comments on this one!!

Thanks for almost 900 kudos on this piece thus far!! You guys are truly amazing, and I'm so grateful to have found this platform and to be able to interact with such lovely individuals <3
Oh, lord - how do I even begin?
I guess what would make the most sense is for me to say I'm so incredibly sorry for
keeping you all waiting for so long. To say that I have an adequate excuse would be a
lie. School, life, health - everything just has a way of getting in the way of what you
care about most, right? None of that matters now, though, because I've taken care of
myself and my mind, and I'm finally back! Like actually and for real this time, not just in
the comment sections lmao.

That being said, this story will MOST DEFINITELY be continuing!! I have an entire
plot and arc planned out for this baby, I've just gotta put pen to paper (metaphorically-
speaking) and do it. My confidence as a writer has come and gone, ebbed and flowed,
so just know that this is the amalgamation of a lot of feeling and hope that there's still at
least one person out there who cares about this story and wants it to continue.
I'll continue writing this story for as long as you'll have me and for as long as it takes to
give it the ending I know it deserves.

Thank you so incredibly much to those who have taken any amount of time at all to
leave a comment or kudo on this story in my hiatus - you're the fuel to my fire, and me
in my jaded slump appreciated it more than you'll ever know.

Without further ado, I present to you (FINALLY) Chapter 5!! Enjoy (hopefully) (: 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Clarke had read many a tale of Greek mythology as a child.

During one particularly pervasive phase of her obsession with such stories, her father had traded in a
day's worth of his food rations at least once a week in order to satisfy the excessive charge for
literature exchange. He did this for two whole months, providing Clarke with stories of gods and
goddesses, heroes and villains, and all the moral quandaries in between - all at his own expense, of

course.

For some reason, though, she'd always gotten hung up on the mythos surrounding Hades'
Underworld - everything from the Garden of Persephone to the legend of the River Styx had her
hungering for more detail, more stories, more.

Of particular interest to Clarke was the Italian poet, Dante's, depiction of the Styx - of how, in his
vision, the Styx was not a source of eternal life possessing the ability to render one invulnerable to
the obstacles of mortality, but, instead, something like the fifth circle of Hell, where the wrathful and sullen are punished by being drowned in the muddy waters for eternity, with those same wrathful souls fighting each other for glory. It was a troubling depiction, one that often left Clarke curled into the smallest ball her body could form in the corner of her barracks, a strange manifestation of terror washing over her at the thought of the damned fighting the damned for nothing but a shadow of their former selves.

She would sometimes see the shadows cast by her furniture begin to maliciously contort and slither across her walls, hissing menacingly and promising to drag her back down to the hellish depths of torment with them. On the worst nights - in the total darkness of the suffocating metal contraption that'd housed her in its synthetic depths for as long as she could remember at that point - Clarke would even begin to imagine the various timbres and tones of the agonized wails of thousands upon thousands of souls destined to drown in their misery for the remaining duration of their sentience.

Her imagination had always been such a lively thing, and the poignancy of the torture she'd inflicted upon herself in the form of recurring night terrors bled into masochistic territory on more than one occasion. These occasions would've been enough to make even the most sane and stable of individuals feel as if they were teetering on the edge of hysteria - and Clarke was only a child when her mind had dared to craft such elaborate measures of torment.

This was worse.

The sound of that bell... It was like nothing else Clarke could possibly put words to - had never even attempted to; for, who in their right mind would willingly label the very crux of their affliction, knowingly give it power over their conscious mind to be called forth upon the mere coincidence that the label flashed across the backs of eyelids in the midst of idle thinking?

It was the sickening sound of flesh and muscle fibers tearing apart upon the sharpened steel of her blade; the sound of wretched screams ripping from the throats of the men, women, and children whose kin she'd ruthlessly slaughtered at Nia's command; the sound of hundreds of souls being forced from their shells beneath a collapsing mountain, a dying civilization...

It was the wordless scream left strangled upon her father's lips as his body was sucked into the endless vacuum of space, his final expression one of pure and unadulterated agony.

It was her mother's raspy voice, slurred with whisky and grief resting heavily upon her tongue, unleashing a verbal torrent of abuse that often swept Clarke into its destructive radius - whether intentionally or otherwise -, leaving her behind to pick up the pieces of her self-worth that'd been shattered by the one person who knew the exact places to hit just hard enough to crack the glass irreparably.

It was the sound of Lexa's uninhibited anguish, raw and heavy with hundreds of nights spent clawing at her own throat in the attempt to stifle the excruciating ache left behind by a kind of pain that'd scraped the very core of her being right down to the bone - a pain stemming from the perceived loss of the one person who didn't deserve to be cried for, didn't deserve such a loving posthumous tribute...

It was these things, and so much more, that Clarke heard when the bell rang, and she would've gladly taken the lashings and physical mutilation that'd rendered her a slave to its tone over the actual sound, itself - almost as gladly as she would've welcomed death as a merciful alternative to the
constant suffering that'd become her routine.

A routine that the entirety of Polis was now privy to in an all-too-public display of overwhelming weakness of the most poisonous variety...

To her own ears, Clarke's screams sounded mangled, twisted by the poignant shock that prickled across every inch of her skin at just how unprepared she was to hear the ringing again. Her hands were clamped so tightly over her ears, her fingernails digging into the skin of her scalp so hard they were drawing blood, and she vaguely registered the immediate shockwave that pulsed through the crowd at her outburst, a deafening silence filling the air where joyous laughter and rhythmic music had been only moments before - silent save for her screaming.

It didn't matter, though.

All she could hear was the ringing...

Hands - urgent, insistent - grasping and coaxing along her back and shoulders, onto her cheeks, frantic words spoken directly into the shell of her ear in the tone of her most favorite voice - drowned out entirely by the keening ringing that smashed against every surface inside of her skull. Clarke simply squeezed her eyes shut impossibly tighter, doing everything within her power to block it all out - make it stop...

Shuffling movement, low tones spoken through voices gruff with distress and overwhelming concern - back-and-forth, too quick to be discernible - different hands replacing the calloused ones on her face...

Then, a different voice - soft and familiar, dripping with that same urgency, somewhat welcome in this circumstance:

"We need to get her inside of the tower, away from any noise - now!!"

Echo. She knew... She would - she knew how to help. She'd never been able to make it stop, but she at least knew...

Everything blurred in and out of focus for Clarke as she continued to wail, hands still shielding her ears, eyes still glued shut, suddenly feeling herself being lifted into strong arms - long and slender, lines and indentations crafted as if to fit along the curves of the blonde's body, alone. More shouts filled the tense silence of the air around them - commands, this time -, and then they were moving.

Despite the hastened pace the Commander was setting, Clarke could feel it in even the smallest movements of the girl's rigid body: the stiffness of her arms, the clipped stutter of her steps, the way her hands seemed to be holding Clarke as if she were something Lexa would fight with every fiber of her being to keep in her possession - Lexa was terrified. She was terrified, and Clarke couldn't bear it - but she also couldn't bring herself to ease the girl's pain, as incapacitated in her fit as she was.

Consciously, Clarke knew that the ringing had to have stopped by now; the entirety of the capital was quiet save for her own wretched screams. She knew this, she really did... But, that didn't seem to matter now - nothing did; nothing of logic nor reason, no scraps of the steeled warrior she'd been carved into, not even the cooing whispers breathed into hair now plastered to the blonde's forehead by sweat, the tone of that ever-soothing voice elevated to levels bled through with a poignant and painful sort of panic.
Clarke was alone, trapped within the confines of her own mind like a helpless animal incapacitated by the bars of a steel cage, and it was a brutal sort of isolation.

Seconds bled into minutes straining to keep up with her belabored heartbeat, the voices swirling around her having become nothing more than an anxious buzz nipping at her eardrum. Her body grew quickly accustomed to the fast-paced rhythm of steps pounded into the earth beneath her by leather-clad boots, Lexa's racing heartbeat providing an oddly comforting soundtrack on their way to the Tower.

Clarke had kept her eyes squeezed shut since the moment the bell had started ringing, her hands still clasped painfully tight around her ears, so it was only the sudden change in the air around her - the unnatural stillness of an enclosed space - that alerted her that they'd made it back to the giant structure. The unmistakable slam of the lower Tower doors let her know that she was, for the time-being, safe from the prying eyes of the clans.

Feeling the sobering blanket of relative safety encasing her in its steady warmth - the crackling of torches and muffled voices finally audible over her reverberating keening - Clarke pushed back against the screams, pleased when the horrid sound died in her throat only moments later, replaced but a much less grating whimper. Not an instant afterward, the blonde felt Lexa's grip shift, the brunette moving one hand up to swipe her fingertips across Clarke's forehead - noticeably trembling as it was.

"Clarke?" she spoke, her soft voice cracking over the syllable with that same poignant fear. "Clarke, ai hodnes, beja, what's going on - ?"

"It's alright," Echo spoke up, her voice uncharacteristically soft with worry - and something else. "She's calming down now, I think. We just need to get her to the healer..." Her voice trailed off, swallowed up once more by the crackling flames and stifling silence that must've been carried inside with them.

What felt like mere seconds later, the scent of medicinal herbs and soothing mint befell the blonde, and Clarke knew they'd finally made it to Nyko's bottom-floor healing bay. Multiple pairs of boots scuffled across the stone floor behind Lexa's, and Clarke wondered just how many people had fallen in to flank the Commander's quick stride back to the Tower...

"I was given word - I've prepared a cot for her here," Nyko's deep voice stuttered suddenly, cutting through the tense silence of the room from somewhere off in front of them. Lexa's grip tightened almost reflexively around Clarke for the briefest of moments, her heart stuttering in her chest as she seemed to all-but-force herself to move towards him.

The very next moment it seemed, Clarke felt herself being lowered down onto a soft bed of furs, the pair of arms around her unmoving save for the adjustments they had to make in consideration of the blonde's comfort, the brunette now awkwardly cradling Clarke atop the cot. The unmistakable press of Lexa's forehead into her side followed almost immediately, and Clarke knew that the Commander must've moved to be kneeling beside the raised cot, unwilling to break the contact of touch for even a second.

The moments following were a silent sort of chaos, a tangible unreeling from the chaos of before - precious seconds spent hungrily grasping at the hopes of creating a space meant for processing, for recovering sanity -

"Enough of this," Echo spat, quashing the ephemeral moment all too soon, voice commanding and unquestionable. "Time spent idle is time wasted. Bellamy, Octavia, Lincoln - go with Roan to find the source of that sound. Find it, figure out who made it and why, and destroy it."
To Clarke's surprise, the sound of shuffling feet and hurried footsteps away from the healing room followed almost immediately, the warriors falling into step with the prince in haste - most likely grateful to have been given something to make themselves useful. (Roan must've been one of the pairs of footsteps that'd slipped into the Commander's rank and file, his previous location a mystery...)

"Anya - I would suggest attending to those crowds immediately, maybe providing some sort of explanation as to why - "

"I do not take orders from you," the warrior cut her off savagely, the words dripping with venom tinged with the acidity of unwanted fear. The awkward shuffling of feet caught in the middle of a pending brawl was enough to quiet Clarke's whimpers, Lexa's breath catching at the blonde's sudden silence.

"Do as she says," the Commander spoke up suddenly, the brunette having lifted her head to turn and address the room, her arms still cradling Clarke. The tone of her voice was scraped raw, bone thin and lacking the usual depth it typically commanded, and the blonde nearly cringed at the tangible difference.

_I did this to her..._

"Find Indra and Gustus, get them to silence the crowd to attention and tell them that the _Azplana_ has fallen ill and will not be making another appearance tonight. Commence the festivities as planned."

An audible swallow. "Commence the... _Heda_, are you sure? What if - ?"

"Do _not_ question me, _fos_," Lexa cut her off, tone subarctic and clipped like the edges of a steel trap. "You will commence the festivities as planned, and draw as little attention to Clarke as possible - understood? The less of a scene we make of this, the better able we will be to handle whatever comes next. Am I clear?"

"_Sha, Heda,_" Anya responded immediately, her tone wavering with some unbidden emotion. The next moment, Clarke heard the hastened clomp of the warrior's boots retreating down the hall, the door to the healing room finally clicking shut behind her.

Before Clarke could process the exchange in any capacity, Echo was speaking up once more.

"_Heda..._" she trailed off, her voice now bled through with that uncharacteristic softness strained by hesitance. "I think you should - she usually..." Echo sighed, noticeably struggling to find the right words. Momentarily steeling her nerves with an audible intake of breath, she persisted - though much more carefully now.

"I think it'd be best if you gave her some space. She usually does better if - "

"I _will not_ leave her side." Lexa's tone was final, beyond question. As if to emphasize her point, the brunette's grip tightened impossibly around Clarke's side, her forehead coming back to rest on the blonde's stomach. The statement was almost animalistic in nature, the Commander broken down to her most instinctual level at this point - the one that demanded that she _protect_ and _possess_ what was hers.

Another fissure split through the blonde's chest, opened and aching from the knowledge that this was her fault, that her awareness of Lexa's mental state was only just now being piqued.
None of this is right...

"Heda - " Nyko's voice cut through the thick air with the careful delicacy of one coaxing a small child - one distressed and nearly beyond consolation. Clarke heard the shuffle of footsteps, the swish of cloth moving closer. "Perhaps...perhaps we should heed the gona's words, if only for the sake of the skai prisa... After all, they have been together through all of this - "

Lexa immediately went rigid at his words, her head lifting up and no doubt turning to fix him with a frigid glare. Clarke still hadn't opened her eyes, unable - unwilling - to even chance meeting the eyes of those who would look at her with such sympathy, such pity.

She didn't deserve it.

After a few more moments of waiting with baited breath, Clarke was slightly startled by two hands cupping her face with utmost gentleness, the smallest of flinches detected upon the blonde's reaction to the touch. The hands stayed there for moments more, the familiar roughness of sword callouses more comforting than the plush softness of the furs beneath her. Clarke could nearly feel the vibrations from the war consuming the whole of Lexa's mind, but she couldn't bring herself to raise the white flag she knew the Commander was searching for - both minds now battling against the same demons with one hand over the other's eyes.

The next instant, Clarke felt Lexa rise to her feet with painstaking slowness - as if waiting for the blonde to stop her - the regret of acquiescence heavy in every movement. A healing press of full lips to the skin of Clarke's forehead drenched in dried sweat.

Then, she walked away, her boots all but silent as they retreated across the stone floor. A cold draft took the Commander's place, and Clarke immediately wished the girl would come back, hold her for just a moment longer -

But, Echo was right. She always did so much better when she was left alone. The better to deal with what always came next...

"Please don't make me do this. I'll do anything else but this, I - "

"Do you dare display insolence to me, seken?" Nia's voice cut her off with enough sharpness to match the steel blade that Clarke kept pressed against the boy's throat, her hand trembling with the shudders wracking her entire body.

She couldn't do this. He was just a kid, maybe a year or two older than Belou had to be now... Another steady stream of tears ran down the boy's face, dripping down to stain Clarke's hand already covered in his mother's blood.

This wasn't the first time she'd been tasked with finishing the job, forced to execute the innocents who just happened to be kin to one who'd committed some sort of perceived grievance against Nia. It wasn't the first time she'd slaughtered one so much younger than herself, felt their terrified screams echoing across every inch of her skin, memorized the innocence that would remain forever frozen on the glossy surface of their eyes. It wasn't the first time - and it most certainly wouldn't be the last - but she was just so tired now.

She was tired, and his eyes were so green.
“Shall I have Roan heat the iron? See how your skin takes to my own personal branding mark, perhaps?” Nia was sneering at her now, looming those precious few inches over Clarke as the blonde remained stooped over the boy she held captive on his knees. She couldn’t do this. She wouldn’t. She’d do anything else -

"You will do as I say, Klark kom Azgeda, or I shall tie a chain around your neck and attach that blasted bell to it!! Is that what you want?!

Clarke cried out instantly, the tremors in her body increasing tenfold as she was torn through with sobs. "Anything else" immediately turned to "anything but the bell," and she hated herself - hated how her mind had wasted away to such an extent all while her body refused to do anything but strengthen. Hated how she was nothing but a slave to an inanimate object, too weak to even end her own suffering for fear she’d hear that damned ringing in whatever existence came next.

Hated how heaven had burned far too brightly across a sky that was uninhabitable to her now, igniting the fiery pits of hell in which she now resided. Hated how quickly she moved to do exactly as Nia commanded, how easy it was to give up on morality, what she’d always grown up believing was right. Hated how easy it was to draw the boy's chin up gently as if to get a better angle from which to place a kiss to his forehead, all the while pushing the blade more deeply into his neck...

"I'm so sorry."

Clarke's eyes flew open, her body shooting up into a sitting position, eyes blinking profusely at the soft candlelight that seemed to blind her in greeting. Still unable to meet the eyes of anyone else in the room, she forced her torso towards the wall, swinging her legs around to dangle over the side of the lifted cot as she hung her head.

In that moment, she wished for things she didn't even know how to put words to. For, how does one wish away their own poisoned psyche, regain what's been lost to them if it's so far gone? The aftermath of hearing the bell seemed to haunt her just as much as the sound, itself, usually did, if only for the fact that she felt so lost in the wake of it all.

Worse yet, more often than not, her mind didn't even require the sound of the bell ringing to send her spiraling in such a way... She saw flashes of marred bodies and torn flesh across the backs of her eyelids, felt her nose stinging with the metallic scent of blood, and it was as if her mind was simply giving up on the quest for sanity in those moments. When that happened, all she could cling to was -

Wait a second.

That's it.

In those moments, all she could ever cling to was the numbness, that all-encompassing feeling she'd learned to rely on throughout the course of Nia's torment. It was that numbness that allowed Clarke to hide away, creating room for the indifferent foot-soldier who was nothing more than a tool, a means to an end. Allowing the cool, unfeeling sensation to wash over her had become
her mind's saving grace, the only scrap of mercy she'd been granted by whatever higher power she could conjure up in her own imagination. It was the switch she needed to flip when the pain of existence became as unbearable as the idea of an early death had once been, and she so desperately needed to flip it now.

Gathering all of the breath the tightness in her chest would allow, Clarke steadied herself against the current, finding that place in her mind she'd set aside for times like these. She could find the emotional plateau just as easily as she used to be able to find joy, the two having switched out of necessity somewhere along the line, and it was almost as good as coming home in this state of mind.

Less than a minute later, Clarke was there in that meadow of nothingness, drifting idly while a hollow knocking replaced the raw beating of her heart. A corner of her mouth nearly ticked up, an odd sort of masochistic pleasure being found in a moment of complete and utter shutdown. All she needed now was her blade and she could -

"Clarke?" That voice... Oh, god, that voice. It made even the most hollow of souls feel lush for harvest.

"Clarke, beja... Please, a-are you alright?" The Commander stuttered over her words with that same desperation and utter desolation that threatened to gut Clarke and leave her numb facade in tatters.

Newfound-numbness aside, how could she possibly explain any of this? How could she articulate a state of mind beyond the stuff of nightmares, past the brink of sanity? There weren't words in any language within Clarke's lexicon that could even scratch the surface of what she'd become now, the desolate place her mind had been degraded to. Besides, she didn't think she could bear the thought of Lexa learning of her inner thoughts now, the way they ate at her mind with steel teeth clenched in an unbreakable grip -

Wait a minute. She didn't actually have to tell them anything about her feelings, did she? All she had to do was tell them what happened while she was with Nia, give them some semblance of an idea about the type of treatment she endured whilst in Azgeda, and they would understand, right? They didn't even have to know the full story, all she had to do was show them.

Let them see the person I've become, who I truly am.

Determination suddenly spiking through the haze of her self-inflicted numbness, Clarke finally moved.

Still unable to turn around and face them, she began the methodical process of undoing her weapons belt, hands slow and steady as she allowed the heavy thing to clang to the hard floor. As soon as her hips were free from their usual weight, Clarke started to undo the layers wrapped and tied around her torso, fingers beginning to tremble slightly as a sharp intake of breath sounded from behind her, clearly alarmed.

"Clarke, what are you - ?"

"Let her be, Heda," Echo's voice cut through the Commander's concern, as gentle as could be for one interrupting someone in such a fragile state yet ever her superior. "She knows what she's doing now."

Clarke could've smiled at how perceptive the Azgeda warrior was in even the most tenuous of moments, but her lips refused to budge the hard line they'd cemented on her face, a line of sweat running down from her forehead to drip off the tip of her nose unbeknownst.
Mere seconds later, the only items of clothing remaining on Clarke's torso were her chest bindings and cotton tunic, the soft fabric clinging to her body with sweat. She couldn't stop, couldn't allow herself to think about what she was about to reveal - she just had to get it over with... Gripping the bottom of the tunic around her hips, Clarke gingerly lifted it up and over her head, throwing it down to the floor with far less care.

The effect was immediate.

Gasps, audible exclamations of utter shock and palpable horror, curses in every language Clarke knew - all of which seemed to throw a woolen blanket over the room, muffling the sounds and stifling the oxygen below their feet. She could picture it perfectly in her head, could see exactly what they were seeing, and a wave of nausea threatened to overcome the numbness she'd been working so hard to maintain...

The Azgeda symbol, burned into the skin at the nape of her neck that'd quite literally bled into the space between her shoulder blades. The scar was now thick and disfigured from the amount of times it'd been pressed into the same spot, her belabored skin having been forced to heal over newly-scalded flesh one too many times. Below that, her back was nothing more than a patchwork of scars, reduced to all conceivable variations of botched healing over everything from merciless whip lashes to deep knife cuts by blades wielded between overzealous fingers.

Clarke vividly remembered the moment that the vanity that used to linger in the depths of her former youth was quashed, remembered how her neck had ached from her having forced it to strain for so long looking in the mirror and trying to remember an image of herself that wasn't mutilated - a face that wasn't scarred, a back that wasn't torn to shreds, a soul that wasn't bleeding...

"Clarke...." Raven's voice was the first to break the silence, quavering over the single syllable as if it quite literally tore her vocal chords raw to have to speak it. "Wh-who d-did this to you? What - why?! Why would they - ?" The mechanic choked on her words, a sob cutting through coherency in an unadulterated expression of pure sorrow, clearly unable to process what she was seeing.

Clarke closed her eyes for a moment, swallowing against the thickness in her throat that stung the backs of her eyes in kind, steeling herself as best she could before finally turning around. Unwilling to see anyone else in the room but Raven, she forced herself to focus solely on the other girl, training her eyes on the tear tracks staining the rich skin of a face contorted in a kind of sadness one unconsciously reserves for incomprehensible tragedy. It was hard seeing Raven so torn up - the mirror image of her back reflected in glossy eyes - but it was unquestionably easier than allowing her eyes to wander to the lone figure standing so much closer to her, the lines of the figure's body pulled taut and collapsing inwards as if having just received some fatal blow to the abdomen...

"It doesn't matter," Clarke answered finally, speaking clearly for the first time in what felt like ages, voice as dead as the eyes of those who haunted her so. "What's done is done... I probably deserved it after all that I've done."

At that, the figure in her periphery quite literally reared up, looking as if that was possibly the most egregious thing she'd ever heard. Raven's anger would have to speak for the both of them in this moment, though.

"You what?!"] Raven practically shouted, voice spiking up a few octaves and barely seeming to scratch the surface of whatever emotion she was feeling. "Oh no, oh hell no. How could you
even say that, Clarke?! Of course it matters!! There's no goddamn way that you - 

Clarke held up her hand, mimicking a gesture she'd seen the Commander give a variety of subjects on numerous occasions. It worked almost immediately, causing Raven's voice to all but die in her throat as the girl appeared stunned by Clarke's unwavering steadiness, her unwillingness to be swayed from her stance.

She closed her eyes for a moment, breathing heavily as she worked to remain in the meadow - to feel nothing, be nothing...

Don't look at her. You can't look at her. If you look at her, it'll ruin everything. You can't - 

"I'm not...I'm not the person I used to be, Raven - not by a long shot," Clarke spoke quietly, forcing the words to surface as if each one was loosed by a punch to her gut. "The things that I did while I was there, under her control - "

"What things, Clarke?! What things?" Raven interrupted her sharply, sounding nearly on the verge of madness now. Perhaps her madness would simply have to speak for those in the room who were currently rendered speechless.

Without Clarke having even noticed, several people were suddenly standing mere feat from her - Raven in front of her looking as if she wanted to run up and shake the blonde by the shoulders, Nyko to Clarke's left, serving as somewhat of a human barrier between the two, and Lexa to her right, the girl's posture rigid as if having approached out of instinct upon seeing someone encroach into Clarke's personal space with even a hint of threatening. Clarke still couldn't bring herself to stare into that emerald glass, the surface upon which she'd be able to see the very fabric of her soul laid out before her, so it had to be enough to unflinchingly meet the gaze of a nearly-rabid Raven, the other girl's eyes blown wide with that raw insanity burning in every note of her vocal chords.

"We can't - " the mechanic choked, struggling to reign in a voice seemingly strangled by despair, an echoing sort of grief from within the very depths of her, "we can't even try to help you if we don't know what happened... Please, Clarke." The girl's plea was whispered, even more garbled by the weight of her sorrow than any other utterance, but it was enough.

It was enough to thread a needle through the crack in Clarke's numb facade, to plunge it into the depths of the girl's heart and scratch at the outer surface, make it ache.

She had to do this - right here, right now, in front of those she'd never wished to reveal her innermost agonies to, but whose presence at such a revelation seemed as natural as the breath she'd take right before beginning the profession. Raven, Wells, Echo, Nyko, Lexa... These people, her people, would be audience to the first of her undoing, and there was nothing she would be able to do afterwards to keep the looks of pity and sympathy out of their eyes - nothing to keep the image they'd always had of her from dismantling as a muddied boot disfigures the glassy surface of a pristine puddle.

Show her. Let her see who you've become, who you truly are... See if she will still care for you when she realizes that you are the hapless product of everything she's worked her entire life to fight against... 

"Echo, go wait for word from Roan or any of the others," Clarke commanded, her voice flat with the tone of leadership weighed down by the souls of too many to count. "If anything important comes of their searches, notify me immediately. Otherwise, keep them out of here until I say so."
The Azgeda warrior nodded immediately, her eyes lighting with unspoken comprehension of more than just the commands given her.

For, who would be the most readily-available person on whom the blame for the events leading up to Clarke's current state could be placed? And what would the price of such blame be at the bequest - and blade - of the Commander?

"As you wish, my queen." With that, the warrior turned on her heels and was quickly gone from the room, the banging of the doors as they fell shut adding somewhat of an exclamation point to the girl's departure.

For the first time in her conscious mind since she'd been brought Nyko's clinic, Clarke noticed Wells, the boy standing idly in the center of the room, the furthest away from the blonde than any of them now. The look on his face... It reminded her of the first moment Clarke had seen the boy right after she'd witnessed her dad being floated, his last strangled scream still banging around inside of her skull, unmerciful. He'd come running from his and Jaha's quarters, tears streaming down his face contorted with a kind of helplessness one might attribute to a child watching a gnarly beast emerge from the depths of a dark closet after having been told their entire life that there was no such thing as monsters, that it was all in their imagination.

He'd worn that same expression of utter helplessness and devastation then just as he wore it now, and it was enough to make Clarke's breath catch in her throat so hard she had to gulp to keep from choking.

Okay, so don't look at him either, then. You know what you have to do, and you know how to get it done. Don't be such a coward now...

Steeling herself against all the stray memories and captive voices seeking to throw her into a spiral once more, Clarke cleared her throat, preparing for both the first and last time the people before her - those she loved most in this present existence, really - would look at her as anything close to human ever again.

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It was amazing how vividly everything came back.

Clarke could nearly feel the weight of Mt. Weather on every inch of her, the rubble and debris threatening to encase her in a permanent tomb adorned with the hundreds of souls piercing the lining of her heart. She heard the voices of Roan and Echo, the dealers of her fate, searching for the body of one long-dead merely on the whim of blind instruction. As she'd later come to discover, neither warrior had ever held even an ounce of malice in their hearts for her, both merely doing what they
needed to in order to survive - ulterior motives aside, of course.

She felt the sensation of confusion anew, the brief moment where the fog of unconsciousness met the prickling of awareness that she wasn't anywhere she'd ever seen before, anywhere she was supposed to be. The bumps razed across every inch of her skin, the way her breath curled like a tendril of live smoke meeting the frigid air - that was her only context clue to proceed Nia's sudden appearance, her only warning that everything she'd ever known and believed to be true was about to be flipped on its head...

The frustration of recalling how helpless she'd felt trapped in that dark dungeon cell for so long, unable to do much more than sit up and crawl across the floor like an infant, remembering every flash of pain in her leg like it was happening anew... It was like she was a conscious witness to every ounce of mental stability and strength she'd accumulated over the past few months bleeding away with every passing second, and she could do nothing more than press on, keep talking until she could say no more...

The shame threatened to ruin all of that, though - everything from her voice to the very fiber of her being. The shame of having to explain how she'd become a slave to that damned bell, how it represented everything that'd ever gone wrong in her life and in the lives of every other. It simply reinforced the feeling that she'd never be able to get away from it, would never be able to know what an existence of predictability felt like after this point - always waiting for the moment when that sound would cut through the air and reduce her to nothing…

What Clarke found even more excruciating than any aspect of recollection, though, was watching the faces of those she cared about most in this skewed sort of existence contort with the very same emotions that remained unnamed beneath the tide of every syllable she uttered. Watching Wells's and Raven's eyes reflect a sort of childlike realization that every fear they'd ever kept at bay about the true nature of humanity was actually correct, and that if such unimaginable cruelty could befall someone they held on such a beloved pedestal as Clarke, then what real absolution was there at all? Would fire could possibly answer such cruelty?

For, fire could never answer fire without the flames consuming all those that sought to watch it burn or try to wield it. Death was the only absolute - the last true equalizer - but it did not make a life lived in torment any easier for those who lived it. It was simply an end to means neither chosen nor deserved by those they befell.

When at last Clarke got to her recollection of Nia's death, there was something in the empty pitch of her own voice reverberating from the stones of the healing bay floor that gave the blonde pause. It caught in her throat, mangled by the feeling of a dulled spike lodged in her throat, the point threatening to crack through the numbness she'd been forced to embrace in order to tell some version of the truth.

She looked away from the point somewhere between Wells and Raven where she'd forced her eyes to rest, where she'd reconciled that it was somewhat more acceptable to place the burden of her soul's damage, so long as it wasn't -

So long as it wasn't on her, the woman standing furthest from the center of that point, the woman with whom her soul had rested for so long. The woman for whom Clarke would gladly brave the burden if it meant that she could feel even an ounce of the peace she'd given the blonde bestowed back on her stable shoulders.

The woman for whom that was now impossible, for whom a facade would never truly be
The woman whose eyes she now met as if seeing for the first time, this bare version of an altered self coming face-to-face with its maker, its keeper.

The expression on Lexa's face was impossible to name, because there wasn't a word that even came close. It was more like a feeling... The feeling of the moment the tip of a knife is plunged into the outer layer of skin covering a vital organ, the second before one can even register that their life is racing towards its end when all you can process is nothing at all - nothing but the point of that knife piercing your skin and the knowledge that the person whose eyes you're looking into is the one wielding that knife. The feeling at the end of a stranger's breath after they've just straightened from bending to open a box containing the head of the only person who'd ever truly known you up until that point, knowing that it was simply their job to open that box, that they surely couldn't have meant any harm in opening that box, but that it was the act of opening the box, itself, that really and truly ruined everything good you'd ever had.

It was something between a breath held and a breath taken, something between hearing and comprehension, and it was surely going to ruin everything Clarke ever had been or was going to be. But it was also something else...

Clarke's face was oddly cold all of a sudden, as if she'd been standing too long in the center of her village back in Azgeda with the wind whipping her cheeks to numbness. No, that wasn't it - it was something else, something...something wet. Her cheeks were wet. She was crying.

But it wasn't how she usually cried. This - this wasn't the tears of one who needed the ringing of a godforsaken bell's tin or the reunion with the ghosts of her past to force her to finally let go of all that which she was holding in. This wasn't the death of her father or the death of the version of her mother whom she could actually love without a touch of tragedy. This wasn't even the death of self that'd given way to the shell of a warrior standing before her stunned jury, waiting for them to rule her as equally deserving of the title of "human" as they.

No, this wasn't any of that.

This was relief. A profound, raw, and unprecedented level of relief that'd been bubbling in the depths of her stomach since the moment she began speaking. This was talking, and having someone finally listen. This was seeing, and being seen, loving, and being loved.

No matter what happened when that breath was finally taken, when this agony was finally processed, this was something - and it was everything.

It was enough to cut through her numbness like steel to water, and it was suddenly as if Clarke finally learned what it meant to feel everything and nothing at the same time. It was the paradox of life captured in a single moment, and Clarke wanted to feel it - she had to, she'd never need anything more in her life than she needed -

"Azplana!!" The sound of her title being shouted on familiar lips echoed through the clinic as the doors burst open with a shattering crack, the faces of Echo and Roan appearing first before a small
crowd of warriors close on their heels.

Before Clarke even had a chance to react, Lexa was in front of her with her back to the blonde, her long sword drawn and her feet poised to strike. Raven and Wells were slightly slower on the uptake, quickly scrambling to fall into ranks behind their Commander as Nyko moved towards the intruders, his hands raised as if to halt their progress.

Ripped from her reverie and forced back into her surroundings like a kick to the gut, Clarke moved to Lexa's side, ignoring the brunette's mutters of protest and attempts to shield her half-naked form from the incoming crowd. As subtly as possible with so many eyes on her, Clarke placed her right hand on the small of Lexa's back, her body angled just so that her head occupied the space above the brunette's left shoulder while still maintaining the contact needed to ground them both. Upon feeling the touch, a shudder ran down Lexa's spine and Clarke heard the smallest hint of a whimper that could only be detected in the space between breaths - a sound that ached with a longing to resume yet another moment now stolen from them...

Echo's eyes found Clarke's immediately, her expression as apologetic as it was urgent, her gaze quickly darting between Clarke's and the Commander's imposing figure as if waiting to see who would throw the grenade first.

"What is the meaning of this?" Clarke demanded, feeling the need to take some of the burden off of the Commander's shoulders in that moment, her voice surprisingly stable considering the storm now raging ever so much more closely to the surface of her eyes now.

Roan shot a quick glance at Echo, his lips pursed in a picture of utmost discontent. Clarke watched as Anya shoved her way to the front of the pack, coming to stand to the left of Roan with her eyes darting wildly between Clarke, Raven, and the Commander. It was as close to helpless as the blonde had ever seen her, and it brought the bitter taste of foreboding right to the tip of Clarke's tongue.

"We found the bell," Bellamy's gravelly voice rang out over the noisy din of the gathering of warriors, the man shouldering his way to the front beside Anya and regarding Roan with a look of utter resentment and distrust. He collected himself in the same breath, though, fixing Clarke with a worried look as he scanned her face.

"We found it and destroyed it, but - " His voice caught in his throat, his eyes darting almost frantically across the faces of those stranding around Clarke and widening slightly upon seeing the remains of Clarke's revelations lingering in their expressions. It must've caught him off guard, as Echo was forced to step forward and continue for him, her eyes never leaving Clarke's:

"It appears –," her advisor cleared her throat, jaw still working, "It appears that it’s a…children’s bell, a popular toy modeled after an instrument from Before – one of hundreds, maybe thousands, present in Polis at this very moment… There’s no telling how many actually exist across clan lines, I’m afraid...

The grim sadness that seeped through every word made each a blow to Clarke’s chest. It never ended, did it?

*Of course* Nia chose a common children’s toy as the weapon that would become the blonde’s undoing at every use. *Of course* it had been designed to make her fear ever leaving her confinement, never venturing outside of a predictable environment in case an innocent child should possess the power to render her a screaming mess of subservience and a desire to obey if only to make it stop…

“That isn’t all,” Roan spoke up again, forcing all eyes in the room to begrudgingly focus on him as opposed to the blonde who most likely appeared as hollow on the inside as her chest now felt.
“Apparently, Tarek of Blue Cliff has taken it upon himself to convene the other leaders of the clans to discuss this…revelation of what he views as Clarke’s fitness as a ruler.”

_How quickly I’ve become their target._

That was all Clarke could hope to think as the room erupted in a storm of angry voices and violent gestures, none of which the blonde was comprehending as she stumbled backwards a step, her hand falling from Lexa’s waist in time with the collapse of what felt like her last remnants of sanity. The brunette took notice immediately, of course, spinning around and instantly closing the gap between them, placing her hands on either side of Clarke’s face as the blonde continued to spiral further.

She could handle this, right? This was just one more thing. It had to be, didn’t it? Her entire existence post-Maunon-de had become _one more thing._

One more thing that she could figure out, something that she could fix…

That was what she needed to do now, wasn’t it? She needed to _fix this_. She could fix this. She had to.

There was never any other way for her now.

Clarke simply nodded, causing Lexa to furrow her brows and stutter over her words, her grip on the blonde’s face tightening even as Clarke gently removed them and took them in one of her own. In the same moment, she raised the other – a gesture she’d taken from the woman whose very hands she was currently binding – causing everyone in the room to take immediate notice, silencing themselves almost as quickly as she’d known they would.

_For, what were they all but the products of never-ending conditioning?_

“This is not the news I was hoping to hear,” Clarke began, her voice surprisingly steady considering how tenuous her connection to her surroundings currently was. “But, I’ve learned not to be surprised be anything in this life anymore…” The entire room was silent, pregnant with expectation and fidgeting for more, the only remaining constant being the Commander’s entire demeanor completely riveted to the blonde’s every word.

“Echo, Bellamy – see if you can collect any information about where these bells are being created. If we can stop any more from being made, we’ve at least dealt with that part of the problem. Report back to me with anything you find, and we’ll go from there.” The two warriors nodded profusely, relieved to have been given the first task to accomplish and clearly taking to the amount of unquestionable authority Clarke laced into every word. They immediately spun on their heels and hurried out of the room as the rest of the crowd parted for them, Octavia and Lincoln wordlessly moving to follow the other two as the blonde figured they would’ve.

“Roan – you’ll act as my head advisor and confidant when I address the rest of the clan leaders. You are to say nothing and _do_ nothing unless I instruct you to. Am I understood?”

“Yes, my queen,” the man responded immediately, bowing his head slightly with a measuredly neutral expression on his face, sensing the unspoken command for him to exit the room and wait for further instruction as he turned on his heels.
Clarke felt like pinching the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger all of a sudden – a gesture of weariness she’d picked up from her father as he used to sit at his desk and work late into the night on the blue prints to a dying machine. She didn’t, though, maintaining her own level of neutrality she’d hoped had remained unbroken despite the number of fatal blows to her chest she’d taken up until this point.

“The rest of you, leave us. I have much to discuss with the Commander.”

Her tone was final, the command unquestioning, and it took all of a minute for the warriors to hastily disperse and make their way out of the room. Clarke pretended not to notice the number of worried and hesitant stares thrown her way as those closest to her made a show of exiting the clinic last.

None of that mattered, though. Not in this moment – not when Lexa had moved to stand before her once more, her glossy eyes fixated on Clarke’s and bringing her right back into that moment they’d both promised to find themselves in again when first they got the chance. The moment that promised to pierce skin with blade - to feel a pain like they’d never felt before – and immediately revel in the fact that the blade could be pulled right back out again.

The wound wouldn’t be fatal – how could it be? A vital organ couldn’t be damaged if it lived outside of your body, could it? Not if it was the very thing both wielding and removing the blade all in one fell swoop…

It could’ve been minutes, hours, days, that the two of them just stood there, staring at each other with the weight of everything said and unsaid – of a moment coming and going only to be returned to them again.

A moment where a breath could finally be taken.

The moment her lungs finally filled again and she could taste the agony of that same paradox on her tongue, Clarke knew that was it.

This was the moment where she and Lexa moved to the beat of the same heart, closing the gap between them that had only ever just barely been allowed to exist, quite literally slamming into each other as a breath became a sob - a hug the only tether to a reality as cruel as it was compassionate.

As the two of them fell into the embrace like it was the only thing they ever needed - would need - reveling in the ability to just be and be vulnerable, Clarke realized something that she seemed to have forgotten somewhere along the way, something that she couldn’t believe she’d managed to lose track of somehow…

In this moment, she wasn’t a damaged soul, a hardened warrior, or even an unlikely queen. She was just Clarke Griffin.
A Clarke Griffin who could finally breathe again.

Chapter End Notes

I hope Clarke's scattered mental state made some semblance of sense - it was intentional, and I tried to mirror it after some of my own feeling of anxiety though on a much much more escalated scale (aka lots and lots of anticipation to the final admission that dissipates just as quickly as it comes about).

Please please let me know what you think - I really do read every comment, even if I don't respond!! Your feedback means a great deal to me as a writer.

A massive thank you again to anyone who has chosen to stick with this story for so long. I couldn't have asked for a better audience to a such a drawn out beast.

I'm already outlining the next one, so hopefully it'll be out sooner rather than later!! And by that I mean, pls don't get angry with me if I'm not as quick as I used to be, but it sure as hell won't take nine months this time lmao.
Hello again, friends!!
Tbh, I'm quite surprised at how quickly I was able to bring the turn-around with this one considering it's a MAMMOTH - over 13k words, I'm so sorry - but here we are. Quick shoutout to my amazing girlfriend for being there for me throughout the hiatus and constantly encouraging me to keep writing no matter how stubborn I was being. You are my guiding light, my muse, and I love you, love you, love you.

Oh boi.. Now to the chapter.
Lemme start by throwing in a massive **WARNING** here: there's violence. Graphic violence, and lots of it. Nothing too gratuitous, though, I hope. There's also quite a good deal of emotional turmoil, but that's subpar for the course right now, I'm afraid. Keep in mind, as far as timing goes, it hasn't even been a day since Clarke made her grand entrance in the throne room. That being the case, I'm still putting a lot of heavy focus on the details - interpersonal interactions, thoughts, emotions, all that jazz. Again, I'm really hoping I don't get too gratuitous with the details, but it's sometimes hard for me not to...

ANYWAYS, this one's a heavy one, and it's exceptionally long, so take that as you will.

Thank you to everyone who takes the time to leave a little comment behind - I read them all, and they keep me going even when I can't seem to find a reason to keep writing, so thank you, thank you, thank you.

As always, I hope you enjoy!!

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Clarke couldn't stop cracking her knuckles.

It was a bad habit she'd picked up somewhere along the line between forced Ascension and her current predicament, and it was just about the only release she could manage without drawing too much attention to herself. After all, the vast majority of eyes in the room were trained on her every move, her every breath, and she didn't want to give them reason to condemn her before she'd even had a chance to make her own case.

Standing off to the side of the room a few feet from the steps to the throne - quite literally up against a wall - Clarke could do nothing more than look on as the scene before her teetered on dangerous devolution.

"She is our queen," Roan growled, the rasp in his voice scraped thin with barely-contained fury as he attempted to loom as threateningly over Tarek as humanly possible without actually drawing a blade. "You cannot and will not stand there and speak of her as if she is some child that won over the
people of Azgeda by batting her eyelids and doing some cute little dance before a dumbstruck crowd!! Klark Kom Azgeda has earned the right to sit atop the throne my mother lay waste to for decades. Don't you dare -,

"Prince Roan, please," the Commander spoke up from before her throne, her posture rigid and carefully reserved with hands clasped behind her back. Her tone was as perfectly devoid of emotion as the mask of an expression she wore now, every bit the leader she was expected to be in such a tense moment. "Now is not the time to give personal testimony on behalf of your queen... It is your duty as her head advisor in this hearing to listen to the concerns of every leader present, and to take each and every point into consideration when contemplating how best to counsel Queen Clarke moving forward from here – nothing more, nothing less."

To everyone but Clarke, she must’ve appeared the very picture of neutrality and authority, the perfect balance of both a mediator and a challenger - but the blonde knew much different.

For, behind those measured eyes of steady emerald glass raged a storm of raucous sentiment barely-contained beneath a careful facade, a short lift's ride up to the throne room the only time allotted to find a place to conceal something so all-encompassing and altering...

It couldn't have been more than mere minutes that the Queen of the Ice Nation and the Commander of the Twelve Clans had been left alone to "discuss" the next steps forward on the path towards a diplomatic solution to their impending problem - the entirety of which Clarke and Lexa had spent in each other's embrace, sobbing into the warm skin of necks and relishing in the re-discovery of the foundations of a home long-thought to have been reduced to ruin. It'd felt more like seconds to the pair of them, though, Anya's knock startling them apart and forcing an almost instantaneous transformation into the people they'd had to pretend to be far too often in such young lives thus far, a donning of such carefully-painted masks. Again, though, Clarke had found solace in the hint of a moment not forgotten, but simply stowed away in a precious and hidden place to be revisited at a time when the both of them could simply be again...

It'd been much easier to reconcile that their time would come again when Lexa held her gaze so, never letting her eyes stray from the blonde's figure even as she helped Clarke dress, making a point of pressing her soft lips to marred shoulders as she painstakingly adjusted the girl's back armor into place over a patchwork of scars. The gesture had been enough to elicit a sob from the blonde, overwhelmed with too many a feeling to name as she simply took Lexa's hands in her own and brought them around her torso to bring them back into the embrace their bodies seemed to incessantly hunger for.

They'd remained hand-in-hand the entire journey from healing bay to the doors of the throne room, only forced to let go upon Anya's near-apologetic throat-clearing accompanied by the agitating scuff of Roan's nervously-shuffling boots against stone. Even after letting go, though, Clarke could feel the warmth of Lexa's touch on every inch of her skin, the brilliance of its breadth and depth overwhelming her with every meeting of green and blue...

It was that same warmth washing over her now, the Commander's gaze having almost instinctually drifted over to where the blonde stood somewhat idly, waiting to be dealt a fate she was beginning to feel a loss of control over. That gaze was enough to remind her to take stock of the air in her lungs, to appreciate the ease with which it was inhaled and exhaled now where before it'd felt like sinking further beneath the surface of an unforgiving ocean cursed with relentless, unbeatable tides.
The corner of Clarke's mouth twitched with the hint of a smile, a flash of pure and unadulterated joy swelling in her gut for the first time in what felt like an entirely new existence. Lexa caught it immediately, forced to hide her own small smile amid an otherwise unfeeling expression, a sparkle of ecstasy gleaming in the corners of her eyes for Clarke, alone, to detect.

"Commander, if I may -," Tarek began, inching slightly forward from where he stood adjacent to Roan near the steps of the throne - both men angling their bodies in such a way that every other person in the room could detect the disdain held for one another radiating from every inch of their frames. "I'd like to bring the focus more to the consequences of having one with a...tainted mind in a position of authority in our world..."

The smug overconfidence dripping from every word had Clarke itching to reach for her blade and begin practicing her hand-eye coordination, but she managed to refrain in favor of allowing his voice to simply waft to the back of her conscious thought, her eyes drifting to a close as she slumped back against the wall. If it hadn't been for the fact that so many pairs of eyes continued to drift in her direction, she'd have allowed the continuation of that descent and simply slid to the floor. As it were, though, she kept her feet planted and allowed her thoughts to lull with the sound of heated voices...

There was no point in arguing with anything being said anymore. They hadn't inquired as to what was actually going on inside of her mind up to this point in the hearing, and she didn't think they were going to bother.

As it seemed, they didn't care; Clarke had shown "weakness" in, arguably, the most important public forum she'd had since her Ascension, to date - during the only event where every clan leader (or a chosen representative) would come together to celebrate the harvest and yet another year of a relatively in-tact Coalition. She'd had her chance to impress the leaders of the clans and to make her debut as something different in the wake of what'd always come out of Azgeda and - in the minds of those speaking here, at least - she'd squandered it. It was like they'd all conveniently managed to forget the fact that she'd taken down the assassin sent to slay the Commander earlier that day with a mere slash of her blade...

All they saw now was weakness - insanity and bloodlust replaced by unforgivable softness and pathetic wailing.

Not exactly the first impression I'd intended...

"Well now he's just talking out of his ass," Raven's voice chimed in from beside the shell of the blonde's ear, her tone barely more than the breath of a whisper but containing enough exasperation to make Clarke's lips twitch.

She blinked her eyes open, unsurprised to find the mechanic pressed against her right shoulder, apparently having slipped in with one of the late-comers only moments before. She'd figured at least one of her friends would manage to make their way to the top of the tower and sneak into the restrictive impromptu hearing of all the clan leaders. The former Arkers were never too keen on following rules, anyways...

The two women shared a belabored glance, Raven's expression the picture of disgust as she scoffed not-so-subtly at some point Tarek was animatedly driving home to the Commander at that particular moment. A few heads turned towards the offending sound, immediately greeted by a murderous glare from Raven and an unspoken dare to bring more attention their way.

"It's like he's incapable of making any real sense," the girl continued, leaning slightly more into Clarke as she matched the blonde's bored gaze in scanning the crowd. "I mean, what is he even trying to accomplish at this point? He doesn't know a goddamn thing about you... You'd think he'd
have bigger things to worry about as the leader of an entire fucking clan, you know?" The fierce protectiveness woven through every word her friend spoke was enough to strike a match of warmth in the pit of Clarke's long-cold stomach.

"I think that is the point," Clarke replied calmly, her entire demeanor unmoved by anything and everything happening around her. "It's a challenge for the sake of being a challenge, a line being drawn in the sand just to see who'd stand on which side in the event of an actual conflict... Politics, as usual." Clarke glanced briefly to the side to see Raven's eyebrows shoot up for the briefest of moments, her mouth forming a hard line as she crossed her arms in front of her chest.

"I thought we'd gotten away from all that bullshit when we left the Ark, you know? I'd hate to think that we jumped one sinking ship to land on a stupid little flotilla in the middle of a hurricane..."

Clarke had to bite back a surge of laughter, coughing a little too loudly than she would've liked as Raven dug her elbow into the meat of the blonde's forearm, clearly fighting a smirk of her own. The noise caused several more heads to turn their way, including that of the Commander who seemed to be finding any and every excuse to look in Clarke's direction. Lexa raised her brows a fraction at the sight of the mechanic having seemingly materialized beside the blonde, but her attention was instantly drawn to the small smile transforming the forlorn face of the only person she ever really wanted to see.

The effect was immediate - a tangible softening of striking features wiped clean of war paint, worked only moments before into the expression of one barely concealing reaction to a bitter fruit meeting untainted lips. The girl's eyes seemed to light up like that of a mirror reflecting the warm flames of brilliant firelight, the only source of sight and comfort on an otherwise dark and frigid night. It was only for a moment, only in the space between one accusatory tirade and another, but it was enough. Enough to remind Clarke to breathe.

"I don't think it was ever about Ark versus Earth, Rae," Clarke breathed ever-so-softly, her tone dripping with reverence as her eyes remained trained on the profile now facing her once more, the perfection evident in every line and surface causing her breath to catch as naturally as it had come. "It's always been about people. Just people... People who do different things for different reasons, who see things according to how they want to see them. People who look to pick fights, people who seek to stop them. And people who know how to take advantage of opportunity when it presents itself..." She trailed off, her voice barely discernible over the loudening din of arguing voices in the space before her - arguing the fate of one whose story they didn't know, would never deserve to hear even if they so desired it.

After she'd destroyed the Mountain and fallen into Nia's trap, she'd begun to think that there was no such thing as good guys, that any person could be reduced to any baser instinct simply out of necessary to survive - no one was immune to such a reduction in any way. She'd seen it firsthand in herself, acting as the conscious witness to every rule of morality and goodness being broken by her own hands, every notion of "right and wrong" becoming "life or death," and it was as humbling as it was telling.

For, though Clarke knew that there would never be a clear picture of what good and evil looked like in her mind's eye anymore - having crossed that line and blurred the two together more often than she could recall -, she also knew that there were some people who occupied a space off of the spectrum between the two that was simply better. Beyond good or evil, there were those who existed that were trying, chasing an ideal or a vision bigger than right or wrong, beyond anything yet discovered in the human experience.
This, Clarke could be certain of. She knew enough of such things to have seen it in the eyes of the only calm in every storm upon first glimpse of it, those breathtaking emeralds lighting the face of the most consequential person she'd ever encountered...

*Lexa* was better. She always had been, and she always would be.

She was *everything*.

The sharp sound of steel tearing from hilt ripped Clarke out of her reverie like some brutal force. An eruption of agitated voices and shouted protests soon followed, the taught rope of tension having slithered its way between every figure present finally snapping and eliciting uncomfortable unrest.

Before she even had time to process what was happening or what she was doing, Clarke was moving forward, shoving her way through murmuring bodies and grumbling warriors to the space nearest the center of the steps before the throne. Stopping just short of the dead-center of every pair of eyes in the room, Clarke had to fight the urge to roll her eyes in some dramatic fashion at the sight of Roan holding Tarek by blade-point at the center of his throat, the tip digging into the soft skin there.

"Say those words again, *branwoda*, and I swear I'll -," Roan's growling threat was interrupted by the metallic clang of blade meeting and sliding against blade, a clamoring thud soon following as the prince's sword fell to the floor, his hand still extended in the air where Clarke had disarmed him.

Both men whipped their heads around to gawk at the blonde, clearly having missed her approach, and Clarke met Roan's gaze with a hard glare, sheathing her sword with obvious impatience.

"A word, Prince Roan. *Now.*" Clarke's tone was unquestionable, as hard as the steel of the blade she'd just re-sheathed as she turned without a second glance to stalk out of the throne room, the crowd parting for her and staring after her as she went.

If it hadn't been for the spike of adrenaline coursing through her veins and guiding her out of the room to the beat of her throbbing pulse, Clarke might've glanced back to notice an uncharacteristically wide-eyed Commander having made her way down the steps from the throne as if to follow, hand on sword hilt and expression a warring picture of bewilderment and unbidden *dread* at something the blonde had missed in the debate only moments before...

"What the *hell* was that, Roan?!!" Clarke nearly spat at the man, rounding on him as soon as they were out of the throne room and slightly away from the earshot of any eaves-droppers. "Are you *trying* to get that idiot to declare war on all of *Azgeda*? Because that's where we're headed if you keep -"

"Did you not *hear* what he just said?!" Roan cut her off just as heatedly, his voice rising an octave out of disbelief. "Do you not know what this means?!" He was looking at her as if he was waiting for her to process some huge revelation, some course-altering event.

Upon seeing the slight narrowing of her eyes and the small shake of her head, the man nearly slapped himself in the face with the force of the hand he allowed to slowly drag down it. After a painful moment of silence and confusion on Clarke's part - and without warning -, Roan turned on his heels and strode down the hall, forcing the blonde to break into a jog to try to catch up to him.

Moments later, he was turning the corner at the end of the hall and throwing the door to the long
staircase tucked into the far wall of the Tower open and motioning for Clarke to follow him as he clomped down the first couple flights with the blonde right on his heels.

"Roan? Roan, what are you - ?" Clarke's questions were abruptly cut off as she was forced to sidestep the prince in order to keep from slamming into his back as he stopped short on the landing between the levels a few floors from the top.

After a moment of complete silence save for their heavy breathing, Roan finally turned around to face Clarke, the blonde having retreated a step to be at his height level where he stood on the landing. His expression was as close to exasperation as he'd ever seen it - exasperation and an increasing amount of sadness.

How odd...

"The Challenge of Five." It was a statement, a title of something Clarke had never heard a single word about before that very moment. She simply shook her head, her eyes narrowing further as her brows continued to furrow.

Roan sighed, ducking his head and nodding to himself as if he should've expected as much. He turned and took a step back so that he could slump against the outer wall of the Tower, cocking his head to the side briefly to glance out the small window in the wall at the past-midnight sky dotted with stars. It was only in that moment that Clarke realized how utterly dark it was in the staircase save for the few torchlights burning sporadically at random intervals.

With that realization came a sweeping wave of exhaustion that seemed to originate from the very core of her being and fly upwards to swirl around inside of her skull. Today had felt like an entire lifetime congealed into one never-ending waking spell, and Clarke couldn't recall the last time she'd slept properly, her anxious anticipation of this very day having haunted her throughout the preceding weeks.

Now that she actually thought about it, though, she was beyond exhausted. She seemed to be existing in an entirely different plane of being now, one paralleling what it usually felt like to have the hardened warrior within her bones guide the shell of her body around on her behalf - one relying on baser instincts that had her desiring nothing more than to march right back upstairs, retrieve Lexa from the throne room, and take her back to the Commander's quarter to collapse in those thick furs wrapped in each other's warmth -

"Clarke. Clarke, are you listening to me?" Roan's stern voice shook Clarke out of her longing train of thought, the man's face coming into focus as an unamused expression illuminated by moon and starlight from the small window.

Clarke blinked rapidly, shaking her head a little as if to physically clear it of fog, and motioned for him to continue. Roan sighed heavily once more, crossing his arms over his chest and shaking his head almost subtly.

"As I was saying, the Challenge of Five is something that hasn't occurred in at least 50 years that I know of... In fact, I don't think any of the imbeciles in that room even remembered that it was an option until Tarek spoke those words a few moments ago - everyone except for the Commander, of course, since part of her job is to remember." Roan furrowed his brows, his eyes glazing over as he stared off over the railing and into the dark depths below, clearly lost in thought now.

"It was written into the Old Codes by a Commander long before Lexa's time, a man rumored to have
had a hunger for bloodlust similar to that of my mother's..." He trailed off, clearing his throat audibly as Clarke hung on his every word. "At the time, the Coalition wasn't even a shadow of a dream, and each clan's biggest enemy was their nearest neighboring nation - no talk of the Maunon-de where any of them were concerned... Everyone fended for themselves, defended their own territory, and murdered anyone who even thought to challenge them. Plus, there were people alive at that time who still remembered the bombings at the end of Before, and I'm pretty sure they were too frightened of organized society making a reappearance to even attempt any semblance of peace talks. It was terrifying enough to have a single person they referred to as 'Commander' trying to lead anything at the time, anyways... Everything was pure chaos, plain and simple - no hint of law and order or thought for future generations, just chaos.

"Supposedly, their Commander decided that there needed to be more systems in place to help the people maintain the majority of the power in society, not the clan leaders - a sham, of course, simply a roundabout way of securing his own authority over any potential threats he might have and to keep a warm bed in this Tower all to himself, no doubt. Hence, the creation of the Challenge of Five." Roan took a deep breath, seemingly exhausted from having to recall something that appeared to strain the edges of his memory from what he'd learned as a child. Clarke, on the other hand, was having a hard time maintaining a steady heart rate, fearing what was to come next...

"Essentially, the Challenge is made when the people of at least five different clans posture their respective leaders to join together to issue a formal Summons to Battle to the standing leader of whatever clan they've all agreed to oppose. Whether it's actually the people of Blue Cliff banding together with others to oppose you or if it's just Tarek and his fellow buffoons making a power play, I'm sure you can come to the proper conclusion there... Regardless, upon receiving the Summons in one form or another, the opposing clan leader can either accept the summons and compete in the Challenge, or they can face trial at the jurisdiction of the Commander, alone - a trial that can end in the leader either absolved of all wrongdoing or beheaded at the Commander's sword... At that time, I'm sure most Summoned leaders chose to just compete rather than go straight to a guaranteed death -"

"What kind of battle?" Clarke interrupted him abruptly, her tone flat and unwavering - unrevealing at how unnerved this entire ordeal was making her. It'd already been such a long day...

"You can't be serious," Roan stated back just as flatly, looking at her with utter disbelief above a smile that spoke of anything but pleasantries. "You can't possibly even entertain that as an option given who the Commander is to you, can y - ?"

"What kind of battle, Roan?!" she pressed him again, much more aggressively this time. She wasn't going to relent on this now; she couldn't.

He simply stared at her for a moment, eyes darting over every inch of her face to gauge how legitimate this line of questioning was. After a few painstaking moments of tense silence, the prince inhaled a sharp breath and shook his head, his hand coming up to run down his face in exasperation once more. He'd clearly seen just how serious Clarke was about this, and it seemed to have aged him years in mere seconds.

"You, alone. Versus five chosen warriors from all of the five original Challenging clans, one after the other with no breaks – only a short reprieve between clans for you to catch your breath. Up to five of them facing all one of you in quick succession... You can't win this one, Clarke. Not by a long shot."

The way he said it - as if it was a commonly-known fact that she was some inferior warrior swinging
around a stick instead of sword - made her blood positively boil, her teeth grinding together as her fists clenched into white knuckles at her sides. Who did he think he was, cutting her down to size before she'd even had the chance to contemplate anything?!

_The one who trained you, that's who..._

"You don't know that," she responded quietly, tone menacing in the hushed silence of the moonlit stairwell, feeling about as indignant as the time Jaha had tried to pass her off as a naïve little girl to her own face - an expendable little girl.

_You don't know me..._

"Oh, but I do," Roan replied immediately, as if answering her unspoken statement, tone just as quiet. "You're a gifted fighter, it's true, and you learn just about as quickly as anyone I've ever seen or taught. But beginner's luck won't be enough here, Clarke - not against warriors who've been training their _entire lives_ for moments like this one, not when you've had a little less than a year to learn the basics of skills they've had mastered since they could properly wield a blade... _It is not and will not ever_ be an option. Period."

Clarke pursed her lips, closing her eyes momentarily upon grasping the salience of his point.

She knew he was right; she probably wasn't even _half_ the warrior of any prospective Challenger she'd face should she compete, and if she actually _did_ manage to land a hit on any of them, it'd be out of sheer dumb luck - or _beginner's luck_, as Roan had so kindly pointed out. But, what choice did she really have at this point? The Challenge had been issued; Tarek had said the words, and apparently there were enough clans backing him that it was seen as legitimate by the outlines in the Old Code. So, in her mind, it really _was_ her only option.

She couldn't very well opt for trial by Commander, could she? As it were, the majority of the leaders were already suspicious of the new _Azplana's_ relationship to the Commander knowing that she was the very same _skai prisa_ turned healer turned Mountain Slayer that'd occupied a _favored_ position in Polis for an extended period of time, privy to far too many private conversations with Lexa to escape the notice of those who'd sought to look – that much she could tell simply by being in the room with them for the hearing for over a minute... Regardless of how well-kept the secret of the true nature of Clarke and Lexa's relationship to each other was, the fact that anyone with a past history of any kind with the Commander was now occupying one of the most powerful seats across all clan lines was enough to arouse unease and, apparently, counter-action.

Counter-action such as issuing a Challenge to a recently-crowned queen who'd made a public display of weakness at her first outing as such, presenting an opportunity for such action to one with ulterior motives unbeknownst to anyone else - one such as Tarek, whose history as both a rebel faction leader and a less-than-loyal son made him the perfect candidate for opportunism. Whether it was about advancing Blue Cliff to a higher status or simply being remembered as the first leader to invoke the Challenge of Five in half a century, Clarke couldn't be sure.

All that mattered now was that _it had_ been issued and, in the interest of regaining the respect of the other clan leaders as well as protecting Lexa - her most pressing personal prerogative regardless of what the demands of her position entailed -, Clarke knew she had to accept. It was as simple as it was complicated, another paradox that the blonde had grown accustomed to accepting as the product of such a complex existence.
"It's my only option and you know it, Roan," Clarke spoke up after a while, her voice barely more than a whisper and cutting through the silence like a dulled blade.

She might as well have just slapped him across the face for all his expression told her. The prince's jaw went slack, his eyes darting from one side of her face to the other as if trying to assess whether or not it was possible for a person to lose their mind in the space of mere seconds.

"Wha - you can't - you won't - No. You can't possibly be -" Roan sputtered, his face contorting every which way as Clarke simply stared back at him, quiet and carefully measured. She'd already accepted her fate, so she simply let him continue stammering to himself for a while longer as she watched the wheels in his head turning, watched him pace back and forth on the landing as he contemplated the same scenarios she'd already run through in her head.

The moment he came to the same conclusion she had, the prince stopped his pacing and locked eyes with her, lips pursed and brows furrowed in a face full of hard lines and unforgiving planes. After an agonizingly long staring contest between doctor and patient for what felt like an eternity in seconds, Roan let out a dramatic groan, throwing his hands up and letting them fall back down to slap against his thighs, moving back to press his back to the wall and slide down into a sitting position. He haphazardly threw his arms over his bent knees and brought his hands up to cradle his face in, the picture of defeat.

"I'm not going to be able to sway you from this, am I?" His words came muffled from between his fingers after what felt like hours of silent waiting, tone seeped in exhaustion and something else... Clarke sighed heavily, sinking down onto the step and resting her elbows on her knees, staring with bleary eyes out of the window towards the stars that'd started to bleed together the longer that she'd been looking at them.

"If I waver now, Azgeda will never be able to stand on the same playing field as the other clans for as long as I'm in power. Anything but acceptance of the Challenge would be seen as an open admission of weakness on my part... It doesn't matter why it was invoked or what it means for me, personally. All that matters is that the Challenge has been issued, and I'm going to accept it - I have to, and you have to let me." Her voice was surprisingly stable considering how much her insides were withering and caving in on themselves as she spoke.

How was she supposed to break it to her friends? Her own fate was far less important to her at this point than their sanity and well-being, and after putting them through so much how could she expect them to -

Oh, god... No...

Lexa.

Her blood ran cold, her heart thudding uncomfortably in her chest as she felt some kind of ache blossom deep at the base of her sternum, her stomach turning itself end-over-end. For all her bone-weariness and tunnel vision, Clarke had forgotten to take into account how the one person whose heart she'd only just begun to re-accustom herself to holding would feel about watching its keeper
throw herself into battle at the hands of some of the most dangerous warriors in all of the lands. How could she have been so daft?!

The sound of the door ripping open and slamming against the wall of the Tower a couple flights up caused both Clarke and Roan to startle, the blonde almost instinctively reaching for her blade before deciding against it.

"Clarke? Clarke, are you here?" The near-desperate sound of Lexa's voice wafted down to the blonde's ears from somewhere above them, causing her heart to quite nearly tumble over itself in her chest with alarm at its tone.

"Down here, Lexa," Clarke called back up immediately, voice pulled taut as she squeezed her eyes shut, hiding her face in her hands as the Commander's footsteps thundered uncharacteristically loudly down the staircase at a near-run.

Clarke heard the telltale signs of Roan rising from his position slumped against the wall, the man not-so-subtly sighing beneath his breath. After only a moment, Clarke heard Lexa round the corner of the flight directly above them and before she knew it, the brunette's footsteps were coming to an abrupt halt only a step or two above where the blonde was hunched over.

"Commander," Roan greeted her solemnly, most likely inclining his head in his usual gesture of respect towards the brunette before stepping past Clarke and jogging quietly up the steps to the next landing where the sound of the door opening and closing again echoed throughout the stairwell.

Before Clarke could even take her next breath, she felt the flurry of Lexa's cloak brush her right shoulder as the Commander gracefully moved around to kneel before the blonde on the landing, gently taking the girl's hands from her face between her own calloused fingers. Clarke opened her eyes slowly, immediately meeting the brunette's gaze head-on and shuddering at the sheer amount of raw emotion present there, the mask of the Commander completely gone now. Lexa brought the blonde's hands up to her trembling lips, pressing feather-light kisses across her knuckles and forcing the splinter deeper into Clarke's still-bleeding heart.

"Don't worry, ai hodnes," Lexa breathed in the wake of soft kisses, her voice trembling like a sound caught in the path of strong winds, her hands shaking where they held Clarke's in her own. The brunette met the blonde's eyes once more, and it was only then that Clarke noticed the tear tracks carving themselves into Lexa's face, her eyes wide with uncharacteristic fear like those of a small child pleading with the dark shadows cast on frigid nights for a moment of peace.

The sight of the strongest person Clarke had ever known reduced to a trembling girl on the verge of shattering into the smallest of pieces tore at something deep in the blonde's chest cavity, causing her breath to catch as she fought against the urge to claw at her own throat for air.

My home, my Lexa...

I've done this to you. You must be so tired, too...

"I have Anya in the throne room preparing the other leaders for your Declaration of Formal Trial," Lexa continued, her lips still trembling as she squeezed Clarke's hands impossibly tighter in her own.

Tears continued to well up and spill over in the emerald glass of the girl's vision, the window to her very core torn right open for Clarke to glimpse the soul writhing within, wailing in a storm of agony.
thrashing it every which way... It was as if she knew she was losing a battle before it even began, too attuned with the way Clarke's mind worked to needlessly fortify a structure rife for tearing down - she was too cunning a leader to waste such resources, anyways. Besides, it was Clarke, after all - the girl who consistently did the exact opposite of what she was told to, who'd never really grasped the concept of acquiescence if there was any other conceivable way of finding a means to an end.

Just one more thing...

Too much...

"Lex -"

"All you have to do is come back up with me and make the public Declaration so that we can begin -"

"Lexa, please," Clarke interrupted her softly, gently pulling her hands free to cup the brunette's cheeks with utmost tenderness, the other girl's eyes fluttering shut as a flash of pure serenity burned across her features and settled there as she sunk into the blonde's touch, temporarily burning against the agony that'd been warring with grief since the moment Clarke had thrown open the doors to the throne room earlier that day - a lifetime ago... Seconds later, Lexa was almost completely at the whim of Clarke's touch, her posture losing its typical rigid set as the blonde easily supported her weight, leaning down slightly to rest her forehead against the other girl's.

To any onlooker, the two of them probably appeared the utter essence of personified and unadulterated fatigue, this marathon of a day finally allowing its toll on their bodies and souls to make itself known and felt. They just sat there for endless moment after endless moment, minute after minute, in complete and utter disbelief that such profound exhaustion could make common acquaintances out of those supposedly still young - much more so in appearance than in reality, it seemed.

Clarke could feel Lexa’s breath trembling with every exhale, the dark stairwell silent save for their combined presence, and it was tearing at every fragment of the blonde’s core that’d been ripped wide open earlier that day, had yet to close over previous scars left unhealed. Even this small moment of tranquility they’d found was as caught in the paradox of their existence as everything else, it seemed – like standing in the Ark’s main airlock looking through the impenetrable glass at your family with the metal door to the dark unknown of death mere feet from your back…

“Lexa, I -,” Clarke swallowed, her voice scraped raw with obvious pain and barely more than a whisper as the other girl continued to wither away in her grasp, their foreheads pressed together as if the other’s weight was really and truly the only thing keeping them from collapsing in on themselves.

“I’m going to accept the Challenge.”

Lexa froze, her entire body going rigid even as her chest stuttered with difficulty to rise properly against Clarke’s legs. The blonde’s grip tightened on the other girl’s face, eyes scanning that same emerald glass that now appeared frozen, a million and one thoughts and emotions flashing through their depths at too quickly a speed for Clarke to even register.

After an agonizingly drawn out silence of Lexa just sitting there, eyes giving contest to a bottomless abyss with an expression as arid as a radiation soaked desert, the brunette suddenly sat back on her heels, posture rod-straight as she gracefully rose to her feet in the next seamless movement. She turned away from Clarke, looking as if she might bolt down the stairs and into the darkness, and
froze - the only evidence that she didn’t instantaneously petrify the sharp rise and fall of her shoulders, the white knuckled fists stagnant by her sides.

“Lexa?” Clarke tried, her voice scraped far too thin for even her own ears to stand.

Nothing. Just a continued rise and fall, a silence pulling itself taut until it strained against every passing second, painfully pressured. Then, out of nowhere:

“No.”

It took a moment for Clarke to register the sound, rising to her feet as if to inch closer to its source, make sure that she’d actually heard something.

“Wha - ?”

“No, Clarke,” Lexa spoke again, cutting the blonde off with a voice nearly subarctic, like a recently-sharpened blade poised to strike yielding flesh. “I will not allow it.”

Clarke’s mouth fell open, her heart thudding unevenly in her chest as she struggled to process what she was hearing… Nothing about Lexa’s response was even remotely surprising or enough to spark even the tiniest flame of anger. It was heartbreaking.

“Lexa, you know it’s the only option I have if I’m going to –.”

“No!!”

The brunette spun around then, eyes wild in an expression that screamed of one scraped to the very core of their soul, ready to fight to their very last breath to protect that quintessential fiber of their being. Lexa was near hyperventilation at the pace that she was breathing, in a state quite similar to that as she’d been in when she’d entered Clarke’s room and confronted the blonde earlier that day, convinced that she was warring with an apparition conjured from the very depths of her despair.

It was unlike anything Clarke was used to, wearing the same face as the girl she loved with every part of herself, but like a photo negative of that girl – all agony and terror where once there had been hard-won levity and tenderness, like a knife in Clarke’s chest where once there’d been a needle.

“Did you really think that I’d agree to that?! That I’m just going to sit there and watch you fight for your life while I remain idle with my hands tied?! That I’d do NOTHING?!” Lexa was shouting now, her voice cracking and ricocheting off the inner walls of the staircase like some brutal force. Clarke remained silent, tears pooling in her eyes as she watched Lexa tear herself apart before her eyes, unable to do much more than stand there and take it - allow the knife to dig deeper, cut through every layer.

It was the most unnerving thing Clarke had ever seen, rivaled only with the Lexa she’d encountered earlier that same day – this broken girl, standing before her heart and barely able to recognize it, chest open and bleeding out with the cause and cure being the very organ that’d ripped the wound open in the first place. She was a single human being with the weight of an entire civilization on her shoulders, who’d been taught that the only thing truly needed for survival was the very thing that would be the crux of her undoing – and that lesson had been proven salient time and time again.

A lesson that she feared she was about to relive at the hands of the one person who’d promised never to leave, never to hurt her – who she’d willingly and freely given every ounce of her being to, if only so that she may finally look upon herself in the mirror and find a whole person staring back at her, a soul having found its mate... Clarke heard this fear in every syllable, every breath that the brunette took as she continued to shout, the distinction between whether or not she was directing her anger
outwards or inwards not as clear the longer she went on. For, if one knows they are willingly walking into a losing battle before it begins, where else can they really direct the blame but inwards? How could they not have figured out a way to stop the battle from even beginning in the first place?

It was tragedy, pure and simple, living and breathing right before Clarke’s very eyes.

It was tragedy, and it was devastating.

“I just got you back!!” Lexa cried, her voice cracking over a heart-wrenching sob as she finally got to the core of her anguish, the very crux of her affliction. “I just got you back, and I – I don’t -,” she choked, unable to find coherence as her body became wracked with sobs, silent and throbbing, reverberating throughout every inch of Clarke’s frame.

The blonde hadn’t said a word since Lexa let loose, and she didn’t think she was going to. It wasn’t her place to talk the brunette through the conclusion Clarke was sure she’d come to immediately upon hearing the Challenge first issued. After all, it was what Lexa would do, and what she had been doing her entire life up until this point – fighting for respect, honoring the laws and systems in place while simultaneously pushing for more progressive reform, and proving to the world that she was a force to be reckoned with in all arenas.

Clarke’s only job right now was to simply be there for Lexa, to be the levy against a pounding hurricane, the armor against a speeding bullet, the grounding force in a frenzy of upheaval.

When one lacked, the other provided – for, that’s what it meant to whole…

“I - I can’t lose you again, I…I don’t think I s-survived it last time.” It was an admission, the smallest and simplest of words heard over the roar of storm winds, together enough to destroy anything and everything in its path.

A sob was ripped from Clarke’s chest, and before she knew what she was doing she was hurrying forward to wrap Lexa in her arms, holding the other girl as if it was possible to keep someone from falling apart by simply squeezing. Lexa latched on immediately, fingernails digging through the layers of Clarke’s armor and into the skin above her shoulder blades, their bodies trembling with wrenching sobs that echoed off the walls of the stairwell like a series of punches to the gut.

The two girls just stood there, sobbing and clutching each other for dear life in the light of the moon and stars, and Clarke was once again struck by the realization that they’d found their moment again – tainted, stretching and pulling against them like a force seeking to tear them apart from the inside, but their moment all the same.

She didn’t know how all of this worked, how it was possible for two people to suffer so much and still be, still breathe beneath the weight of a force that was as relentless as it was soul-crushing. But, here they were – breathing, being, and fighting.

They could make it through this. They had to.

It was the only way either of them knew how to live anymore.

*Just one more thing, right?*
The roar of the crowd was deafening.

No matter which way Clarke turned, she was greeted by a crushing cacophony of sound – the cries of warriors from every clan, yelling in every known tongue, all gathered to watch her fight for her life.

A life they knew nothing of, just as she couldn’t begin to guess their reasoning for wanting to attend such a brutal event - couldn’t make a judgment on their character just as she hoped they wouldn’t condemn her, regardless of the outcome.

Her armor felt heavier than usual, her skin oddly irritated by the war paint applied generously around her eyes, and it was all she could do to keep from fidgeting with her swords like an impatient child. She couldn’t keep her foot from tapping regardless of how many times Roan had warned her not to do it. She was anxious, plain and simple, something like an electric current running far too close to the surface of her skin than she’d like given the effort she was putting in to find the meadow of her mind – the place where donning the façade of a numb and instinctual foot soldier was as easy as breathing.

Clarke was feeling drained, though, barely having gotten enough sleep to walk straight, let alone defend herself against at least 25 seasoned warriors with the reputations of their respective clans on their shoulders.

It’d just been so hard to stop staring at her, afraid that she might miss the smallest of details she hadn’t yet gotten the chance to memorize, Clarke falling into a reminiscent reverie as the crowd’s din became little more than a whisper in her ear…

It had taken a while to coax Lexa to a point where she would listen to the blonde’s argument, a vocal reinforcement of the logical conclusion they’d both already reached but that which the Commander refused to accept without running through every other possible scenario that might prevent Clarke from risking her life in such a way – everything from Clarke stealing away in the night and making her way back to Azgeda under the Commander’s personal protection to Lexa outright cutting Tarek down where he stood, none of which were even remotely plausible or advisable for a long-term future within the confines of the Coalition… Lexa knew this, she really did, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t going to fight it tooth and nail to the bitter end, loosing a cry of intermingled devastation and defeat after which Clarke could do and had done nothing more than draw the other girl back into her arms.

The journey back up to the throne room had been only slightly less excruciating, Lexa unable to meet Clarke’s gaze for even the shortest of seconds for fear of losing her grip on the Commander’s mask once again… Clarke’s public acceptance of the Challenge went over only slightly better, most of the faces in the room intermingling utter shock with immediate apprehension at what some of them had just agreed to witness – and, in some cases, participate in. The smug look on Tarek’s face had been enough to send Clarke marching from the room with fists clenched at her sides, the feeling of at least four bodies hot on her heels as she threw open the throne room doors and stormed off to her room, leaving the befuddled clan leaders to begin making arrangements to send for their five readiest
– and most expendable – warriors.

Despite the calls of her name from the voices of those most familiar to her, Clarke hadn’t stopped until she’d reached her quarters, Lexa having been one of the first to follow on the blonde’s heels, her duties as Commander seemingly finished for the evening and the distraction of the sudden organized chaos in the room enough for her to slip out without saying a final word.

The challenge would be the next morning, as per the Code, and there was nothing the Commander could do or say to alter that fact or make it any easier for those not wishing to process it. All that’d been left for her to do had been to walk away, leave those who’d caused this mess in the first place behind to deal with the consequences …

Raven had been the first to react once Clarke’s bedroom doors had closed behind her and her entourage, Anya apparently having explained the details of the Challenge of Five to her during Clarke’s absence. She, like Lexa, had immediately begun shouting in the blonde’s face about how stupid a decision she’d made and how the mechanic couldn’t believe Clarke could agree to such a thing after what she’d told them. Clarke had just stood there, allowing herself to be the punching bag for as long as she needed to be, not even moving to react when Raven slapped her across the face – the flurry of movement in the room behind the mechanic was enough, Lexa seemingly coming out of her numbed trance for a moment with eyes blown wide in alarm and concern, Roan and Anya coming forward as if to pull Raven back, but the blonde had simply shaken her head, barely registering the sting on her cheek.

She’d known that Raven needed to get it out, that she needed to take it out on Clarke in order to be able to cope with everything happening at once, and the blonde couldn’t blame her for reacting in the way that she did. After all, Clarke had almost tangibly been able to see the image of her scarred back burned into the gloss of Raven’s dark eyes, and it wasn’t like any of them had had any time to process those revelations, let alone all of this…

Almost immediately after the slap, though, Raven had collapsed forward into Clarke’s arms, reduced to a sobbing mess at the whim of whatever storm was raging beneath that purposefully-hardened exterior. Clarke had held her for a while after that, briefly meeting the sorrowful eyes of Anya and the hardened lines of Roan’s face, the man seemingly refusing to show even a glimpse of the emotions raging beneath the surface. Lexa, on the other hand, couldn’t stop staring at Clarke now, her expression a torrent of warring emotion, as raw and vulnerable as the blonde had ever seen her in the presence of others…

When Raven had finally gathered herself a bit, she’d separated from Clarke to murmur an apology, her words garbled with leftover sobs as the blonde wordlessly accepted the sentiment. Clarke had then motioned for Anya to come forward at last as the warrior instantly moved to wrap the mechanic in her arms, muttering quiet coaxes as she quietly walked Raven out of the room, throwing one last conflicted glance in Clarke’s direction before shutting the door behind them. Roan had soon followed, once again inclining his head in respect to Lexa and barely throwing a glance in Clarke’s direction as he’d left.

After that, they’d been alone – staring at each other, both refusing to look away as fresh tears had begun to well in both pairs of eyes. The moment had rippled and buzzed all around them, the tension of silence as potent as the thickness of the air around them, and Clarke hadn’t been able to take it anymore. She’d surged forward, taking Lexa in her arms and pressing her lips to the brunette’s as if it were oxygen and she were deprived. Lexa had returned the kiss immediately, her arms moving to wrap around the blonde’s shoulders and press them as closely together as possible, the breaths between kisses coming out as ragged sobs and whimpers.
They’d kissed like this – hungrily, heavily, and with every ounce of passion they so possessed within themselves – until both facades were stripped carelessly to the floor, Commander and Queen forgotten as Lexa and Clarke took their rightful places in that endless moment. With only the barest layer of underclothes between them, the two girls had fallen into bed, every possible point of touch met, and Clarke allowed Lexa to do as she had earlier on in that lifetime of a day – glide her hands across every inch of skin, memorizing, appreciating, processing…

She’d worshipped Clarke in the most intimate and respectful of ways, never taking more than she was given and refusing to be deterred from her task of just being, finding that place of tenderness awakened within her soul like the smallest of flames blossoming into its rightful bonfire.

The tears had come again eventually, and all Clarke could do was simply join Lexa in the chorus of misery, both girls holding onto each other as tightly and possessively as humanly possible, unable to look away for even a moment for fear of waking up from the dream of re-discovery…

The sound of Echo’s hard knock on the door had roused them both, Clarke feeling as if she’d physically sunken beneath a crushing dome of quicksand in all the weight of her exhaustion…

Commander and Queen had dressed quickly, both unable to look away from the other as nightmare had quickly threatened to become reality. Echo had entered shortly after that, sparing the Commander a respectful glance as she’d made her way over to Clarke, her expression carefully blank as she silently began helping her Queen with the layers of armor she was going to drastically need mere hours later. The Commander had simply stood by and watched, refusing to let the blonde stray from her sight for even a moment as Echo became a flurry of movement around her.

When it came time to apply Clarke’s war paint, Echo had hesitated a moment, lips worked into a hard line as she seemed to conduct a silent battle within herself. After another drawn-out moment – and Clarke coming to the realization that not a single word had been spoken yet that morning, no report on the state of the bell situation, nothing – Echo had stepped aside and held the small metal canister of paint out to Lexa, the brunette blinking in surprise for a moment as she fought to repress some sort of raw reaction from making itself known to both the women looking to her now. With a quiet and grateful sort of acquiescence, the Commander had moved forward, working with gentle yet efficient hands to make a masterpiece out of the white paint that distinguished an Azgeda warrior from the rest - a single stripe of blue paint from a second canister beginning at Clarke’s right brow bone straight through the middle of her eyelid and down her cheek the mark of the true ruler of the Ice Nation. Lexa had then moved around to begin work on braiding Clarke’s hair into place, taking painstaking care to ensure that every strand was tucked neatly into a single interwoven braid down the blonde’s back, leaving no piece behind to render Clarke vulnerable to foul play at the hands of another warrior. The feeling of the brunette’s fingers weaving gently yet precisely through the blonde’s hair had been enough to lull Clarke into a tranquil state of contentment, the feeling as ephemeral as the fleeting moments stretching and pulling at the odds and ends of the souls occupying each and every one of them…

Coming back to herself with a bump, Clarke scanned the crowd for what felt like the hundredth time, trying to make it seem as though she was scanning the faces of random onlookers and some of the officials present, but the blonde knew that those closest to her knew otherwise…

It’d been difficult at first to find a familiar face, the sheer size of the crowd proving to be nearly impossible to comb through. Besides the raised platform nearest the base of the tower that’d been designed to seat the clan leaders, the rest of the crowd was just bunched up chaos. Clarke didn’t know how they’d managed to clear the huge open space used for the festival that’d wrapped up in
the wee hours of the morning, but they’d somehow transformed it into a makeshift arena without seating - the only separation between the crowd and where the fighting would be happening a line of the Commander’s guard standing at attention every few feet or so, keeping the crowd in check.

The first familiar faces she glimpsed were those of Bellamy, Octavia, and Lincoln – all wearing almost identical expressions of a grave solemnity and dread-filled anticipation. Clarke swallowed loudly, audible to her ears, alone, and continued her perusing, stopping cold at the sight of Jax and Wells standing together, her old friend turned to speak directly into the shell of Jax’s ear, the dark-haired man’s face seeming to pale with every word Wells spoke to him.

Unable to look at either of them for too long without her heart dropping dangerously low in her chest, Clarke continued on, stopping at the front of the crowd before the raised platform where Raven stood beside Nyko, the recognizable back of Anya facing away from Clarke as the warrior acted as one of the living barriers between the blonde and the melee of bodies beyond. Raven’s hands were twitching incessantly by her sides, her expression a mask of terror and apprehension as she caught Clarke’s eyes on her, giving the blonde as an encouraging a nod as she could muster, Nyko’s expression not much for the better… She knew that Lexa had some part in the positioning of the three at the center of it all, Nyko’s portable healing kit held safely between his feet for purpose of healing Clarke, alone, the instructions to the other two women unclear in that moment…

Gulping down another lump in her throat with immense difficulty, Clarke directed her gaze to the center of it all, to the Commander seated on a lofty and elaborate perch elevated slightly above the other clan leaders whose faces Clarke couldn’t bear to meet in that moment. For, all that she could see – all that she could ever see, really – was Lexa, dressed head-to-toe in her formal uniform with war paint and head-piece pristinely in their respective places. She was like something out of a dream; a figure clad in the protection of midnight, paint carefully adorning her cheeks like the tears of acid rain carved into youthful skin - the symbolism marking yet another delicate paradox…

Though every bit the Commander in this moment as the crowd continued their raucous all around, Clarke caught a flash of Lexa peeking through her hidden cage, a burst of agony screaming in the depths of sharply cut emeralds, a silent writhing only outwardly evident in the white of the knuckles clenched around the armrest of her chair.

Please don’t leave me…

Clarke couldn’t bear to look at her much longer, forcing herself to look away and focus on the increasingly-agitated crowd all around her, the anticipation of what was to come bringing the air to a boiling point across every inch of the blonde’s skin… She was waiting for the signal, a gesture from the Commander that would trigger the release of the first warrior into Clarke’s path – a signal she knew Lexa didn’t want to give, was probably warring within herself about at this very moment –

The war drums began to beat – the Commander having given the signal that had apparently been missed by the blonde –, a steady and syncopated rhythm reverberating throughout the crowd and leaving them roaring with excitement. The onlookers were forcefully parted by the guards of the first clan, the flag of which Clarke didn’t recognize – didn’t bother to, either, as she was only concerned with one…

And, just like that, it had begun.

The first warrior lumbered into the enlarged circle behind his guards, a hulk of a man at least twice
Clarke’s size with a bald head and indiscernible warrior’s garb about a number of tattoos that presumably covered every inch of his skin besides his face. He carried a double-sided axe as his only weapon, a smug grin on his face as he assessed the blonde, seeing his sheer size as an obvious advantage over her…

She closed her eyes for a moment, her adrenaline spiking as she placed her hands on the two swords sheathed at her waist, her thoughts slowing to the pace of the quiet meadow overtaking her mind. Before she even took her next breath, Clarke knew she was there - knew that she’d found that sweet spot where the mechanically-efficient warrior that usually lay dormant in her bones took over, guided her every movement, every thought.

She was there, and she was ready.

*Beginner’s luck be damned*…

*I can do this.*

A barbaric – and wholly unnecessary – battle cry roused Clarke from her moment of peace, the man now running towards her at a shockingly quick pace, his gate seeming to propel him forward against the logic of physics. She remained still, her blades raised and protecting her body in an “x” formation, waited until he was roughly five paces away – his lengthened axe outstretched as if to skewer her with it – before she parried left and spun around to face his retreating back, purposefully missing the point of his weapon by a narrow margin so as to throw him off, force him to focus his energy on avoiding mowing down the crowd he was barreling towards instead.

When he grunted with the force it took to slow his inertia before slamming into a couple of frightened onlookers attempting to scramble back as far as the mass of bodies would budge, Clarke knew she had her chance; with a sharp intake of breath, she loosed the small knife on her belt and flung it forward on her exhale with the care of one attempting to split an already-sunken arrow down the middle of its shaft, watching with hidden satisfaction as it buried itself deep into the very point where the man’s skull met the top of his spinal cord.

The crowd went wild, roaring to the point of near soundless pulsation in the blonde’s ears as she quickly lunged forward to retrieve her blade from the falling corpse and spun around to face the direction of the already-incoming second warrior – this one a much smaller woman with jet-black hair and furious eyes. Just as before, Clarke remained in the defensive position – as she would for as long as humanly possible, conserving the energy she was keeping banked within the very grit of her bones – assessing the other woman who immediately fell into a crouch and engaged the blonde in what she liked to call the warrior’s dance, a slow and calculated circling wherein one waited for the other to strike first and lose their advantage... Clarke studied the woman closely as they continued to dance, noticing how the woman favored her right leg a little too blatantly, too dramatically. Seeing the blonde’s eyes dart from her face to her leg and focus on it, noticeably allowing her place in the dance to falter, the warrior smiled a menacing yellow grin, lunging forward and sprinting towards Clarke as she made to do exactly what the blonde had wanted.

The woman was on Clarke in an instant, multiple blades meeting with a loud clang as the crowd cheered, the blonde not wanting to draw this out any longer than was necessary. Using the power poised in her strong thighs, Clarke pushed that strength upward and into her blade, surprising the other woman with a force that sent her stumbling back a couple steps as the blonde resumed their dance, moving up with lightning speed as the other woman moved back and rearing up to kick her directly in the left kneecap which buckled backwards with a sickening snap. The other woman screeched in pain, forgetting herself for a moment as she bent to clutch her kneecap, presenting Clarke with the perfect opportunity to step slightly to the left and use the momentum from that step to
propel her slightly into the air to bring both swords – still in an “x” formation – straight down, easily beheading the woman and cutting her keening cries off in one fell swoop.

As the next warrior stalked into the circle, the crowd still roaring all around, Clarke couldn’t help but let her mind drift as her body continued to perform what it knew by muscle memory, every bit of Clarke disappearing as the soldier within took hold of her blade…

Time began to slip away like the rivulets of sweat dripping from every inch of Clarke’s skin, a whirring pulse in her ears drowning out all other sound besides the harshness of her own breathing. She was all movement – all pivots, parries, lunges, and twirls, her blade an extension of her arm as she cut through the flesh and muscle of strangers whose faces she was already losing track of.

In the back of her mind, Clarke recalled a snide comment Roan had made to himself in the latter stages of her training, something about the “farmers and peddlers” of the other clans being no match for his training prowess after she’d called him out on some small step in his footwork. Thinking back on it, though, the prince had been right; most of the warriors – though trained from a young age, it was true – weren’t soldiers by trade. They were farmers, merchants, and healers – parents and children -, the bulk of those wishing to make a trade out of fighting already sworn into the Commander’s army, a contingent of people who were forbidden in more ways than one from participating in such ventures as the Challenge.

Most of these people were just throwing themselves at her, very few of them actually taking the time to engage her in legitimate sword play before resorting to clumsy last-ditch-effort sort of tactics…

What felt like only moments later, Clarke watched as yet another body fell to the ground to join what she believed to be around fourteen others, the third of five clans eliminated from the bunch. Finally taking a moment to observe her opponents a little more closely, she noticed the garb of Bright Forest and the Clan of Foliage among those slain – neither of which were known for their prowess in battle.

Despite the slight hit to her ego, that explained it – explained why those she’d faced so far were even less formidable than even the young warriors of the Azgeda army had been when Clarke used to spar with them. Only a few more to get through and she could –

She narrowly missed the spear hurtling her way, feeling the sharp point slice through the outer meat of her upper left arm as she launched herself out of the way, unable to spare a glance for the poor soul whose chest became the landing dock for the flying object. Thrown off her balance as the gash in her arm began to gush with wet blood, Clarke barely registered the incoming warrior barreling towards her at remarkable speed, brought back to her senses only as the force of what felt like a freight train slammed into her chest and sent them both crashing to the ground.

The force of the man’s impact was enough to squelch any flow of air to Clarke’s chest, the blonde sputtering against the grips of suffocation and barely managing to raise her arms up to protect her face as the warrior sat on her chest and began raining his fists down towards her skull. The brunt of his punches was hammering into her forearms, but the occasional glance of a knuckle across her cheekbone was enough to send her head back into the dirt, reeling.

She was all but defenseless, left to simply keep her head from being bashed in or wait until there was enough of a reprieve in the man’s rhythm for her to figure out what to do. After the next brutal blow to her cheekbone, though, her teeth rattling within her pounding skull, Clarke got desperate.
With a yell of immense frustration, she planted her feet into the ground and pushed herself upwards in the dirt, interrupting the warrior’s rhythm enough to rear up and knee him with as much force as she could muster right where she was taught she could hurt a man most. It worked better than she could’ve hoped, and Clarke watched as the warrior froze up immediately, face contorted in agony as he rolled off her. Using the adrenaline now coursing through her veins to her advantage, Clarke rolled in the opposite direction, using her momentum to launch herself up onto her feet and quickly making to grab the blade the man had knocked out of her hands upon his initial assault.

With more force than she believed herself capable of exerting in her current state, Clarke ran forward and plunged her sword into the man’s back, removing it again quickly to stab a second time into his chest cavity nearest that vital muscle that allowed his blood to come pouring out over her blade.

As his body fell limp to the ground, Clarke barely registered the roaring of the crowd all around her, could only make out the barest of details of the faces staring her down at every turn.

He’d definitely broken one of her ribs, maybe two. She could feel it every time she attempted to take a breath, each attempt causing her chest to sear with pain and hiccup with lack of oxygen. Her head felt light, her limbs heavy as she turned to face the approach of the next warrior, a woman once again seeking to engage her in that fatal dance…

It was Delphi. These warriors that’d presented the first – and most excruciatingly painful – obstacle in her Challenge thus far were from Delphi, which explained everything from their dirty tactics to the ostentatiously murderous glares each of them wore. Historically, they weren’t the biggest fans of Azgeda, to say the least…

Clarke, for that matter, was exhausted, her adrenaline having spiked to a peak throughout the past few minutes, her torso doused in blood from a variety of wounds she’d taken throughout the Challenge that only just now seemed to be opening themselves up. Her bones ached, her breath coming in short gasps as she clutched at her ribs, wincing when even that motion was too much. Her vision wouldn’t clear, dark spots swimming in both eyes as she wiped a trembling hand across her brow, most likely smearing whatever war paint still remained on her features. It was all beginning to catch up to her – her injuries, lack of sleep, dehydration, emotional turmoil – and it took everything she had not to cry out in exasperation. She just wanted this to be over.

Clarke couldn’t bear to look in the direction of anyone she cared about, couldn’t stomach the thought of taking in their expressions as they watched her stumble around and clutch at her injuries, blood pouring from nearly all of her orifices now. Even if she could see at all at this point, the thought of looking into Lexa’s eyes and attempting to rifle through the anguish the girl was probably struggling to hide at this point as she felt every blow to Clarke’s frame somewhere deep within her… It was too much.

This was all too much.

The last clan to step into the metaphorical ring was Blue Cliff - of course. Their warriors were roughly on par with the skills of the Delphi, only possessing the slightest bit more sense to try to engage Clarke in various degrees of sword-fighting - if only in the attempts to wear her down even more than she already was.

She was almost more comfortable with this style of fighting, though; it was predictable, heavily-reliant on observation to discern whatever move her opponent was going to make next, and it was
almost enough to distract her from the injuries slowing her to a jarringly sluggish pace.

Almost…

By the time she disemboweled the fourth Blue Cliff warrior, Clarke was just about ready to collapse. Her senses were dulled, her body having taken quite a few more gashes and blows as her hands grew sticky with a mixture of fresh and dried blood similarly caked in layers down her arms and legs. The third warrior had dealt a particularly harsh hit to the thigh of her bad leg with the steel toe of his boot, re-awakened nerve pain shooting up into her back like some sort of visceral flashback to another life.

As it were, she was limping noticeably now, trying to keep as much weight off of the screaming pain in her leg as was humanly possible…

When the fifth warrior finally strode into the ring, Clarke was barely moving, having to all-but-drag her leg along behind her as she raised her sword in some half-hearted attempt at self-defense. He advanced on her slowly, his athletic build presenting less of an obstacle than some of those before him, and soon they were off.

He swung left, she parried right; he elbowed her in the dominant shoulder, she landed a kick directly to his right kidney – it was push and pull, a game of mirrors, and Clarke was getting sloppier as time dragged on. Her strikes were weaker, her lunges slower, and she felt it deep in the very core of herself every time he managed to land a hit on her. Clarke was on the defensive for what felt like the hundredth time during the Challenge, and it was exactly where she didn’t need to be at this stage in the game.

Without warning, the warrior loosed a fierce cry, drawing his blade above his head to bring it straight down to meet Clarke’s sword, the clang of metal on metal ringing out into the cacophony. The blonde was forced onto her knees, using every ounce of strength left in her core to keep his sword from getting too close to her neck, the blades inching further and further down.

Clarke cried out in pain as the warrior forced her left arm into a strange angle in her attempts to prevent her own beheading, the large gash ripping open even further as her knees pressed into the dirt below her.

Suddenly, the warrior eased up on the press of his blade, causing Clarke to lurch forward and giving him the perfect opportunity during which to disarm her, kicking her sword across the dirt where she’d previously lost track of the other blade in the mass of dead bodies haphazardly splayed here and there.

In the next moment, the warrior was lifting Clarke to her feet by the collar of her back armor, his blade pressing into the tender skin of her neck as he breathed heavily against her back.

“Tarek sends his regards,” he spat directly into the shell of her ear, his words barely audible over the crashing of blood in her ears.

He drew his blade away from her throat, making sure to leave a thin incision where the metal had been, and Clarke knew she was done for…

With the finality of someone planting their stake into a patch of unclaimed earth, the warrior buried his blade into Clarke’s back, the point piercing the soft spot just on the inside of her right shoulder blade, jutting clean through to her front.
It was unlike anything Clarke had ever felt.

Unexplainable agony, breath-stealing force…

Faces flashed across the front of her eyes like the ephemeral nature of her life now, indiscernible, implacable. The personification of a life flashing before one’s eyes…

Someone was calling her name – screaming it, really… Who was it?

*Why can’t I recognize the sound of voices anymore?*

Surely this meant death was near, didn’t it?

Without her conscious mind even having processed it, Clarke’s fingers were toying with the hilt of the hidden knife blade on her left hip, fingers numb and clumsy as she grasped at it with unconsciousness quickly closing in around her vision.

The warrior was still pressed to her back, his blade still buried in its sheath of flesh, and Clarke saw the briefest spark of an opportunity…

With a shout as guttural as Clarke had ever mustered, she drew the blade from off her hip and up through the air, bringing it backwards and down to bury it in the man’s shoulder muscle. He cried out instantly, lurching away from Clarke as the blonde turned on him, his blade still buried in her back as she stumbled forward.

Making no qualms about the fact that this was quite possibly the very last thing she’d ever do, Clarke dragged herself right up to the man, placing her hands on either side of his face as if to comfort him.

With an exhalation as heavy as the sword still captured within her, Clarke snapped his neck.

It was anticlimactic, Clarke knew. It didn’t matter, though.

She was going to die. She was going to die, and she could barely patch her thoughts together coherently enough to feel anything about it…

Hands all over her.

*How did those get there?*

Voices, anguished.

Flashes of faces, indiscernible.
A forest on fire.

A whisper, choked and stricken.

"Don't you dare leave me."

Weightlessness, lofty like the view from the very point of the tower.

A thread, pulled taut and desiring to be cut loose…

“…Skaikru messenger at the gate…”

I am become death.

Chapter End Notes

lordt...
well, that was a lot lmao. Very heavy, very hard to write at points, but necessary, all the same.
We're getting to a point where the angst is gonna lighten up a bit - and, yes, that does mean that I'm promising fluff in the **near** future. I just need it to feel as natural as the angst has felt for the past couple of installments. So, tbd on that one, but it's definitely gonna happen..
A note on the fighting scenes: I wanted to make it clear that this wasn't the best of the best fighting against some girl who's only trained for a year and then miraculously getting beaten by her. These are volunteers - many of them laborers by trade - who simply agree with the cause and want to represent their clan well. Sure, they've trained their whole lives like everyone else, but it was never as serious of training as someone with, say, the motivation of torturous conditioning to urge her on... Plus, I was always somewhat suspicious of how everyone in the show seemed to be these experts of fighting when, in my opinion, it wouldn't make sense for every.single.person to be trained as warriors if they were going to end up selling goods on the side of the road,
you know? But I digress...
I like the more grungy, unpolished and uncoordinated fighting where it seems like people are just throwing punches and hoping for the best - people are messy as hell, so it would only make sense that their fighting styles would be, as well. It feels more realistic to me that way, but I completely understand and respect if you disagree.
I'm v much doing my own world-building and re-building where I can - hence the backstory that I hinted at a little in this chapter - so hopefully that's something y'all will look forward to, as well.

Alright, enough of my 1 am rambling. I hope this wasn't too painful a read, and I hope to see you all next time!! It shouldn't be long (;
PSA: night updates are definitely a thing with me. I tend to come alive after like 9 pm every night, so consider this a lil disclaimer about update times in the future - 9 times out of 10, it's gonna be pretty late into the night on EST. It's midnight where I live, to give you an idea. Sorry bout it.

Also, it was requested of me that I start doing chapter recaps at the beginning of each one, and I'm definitely planning on doing this for future updates - I just find myself a bit too tired from editing to include one in this chapter, unfortunately. Apologies on that, but I give quite a few recalls and context clues throughout the chapter, so hopefully that helps a bit to make up for the lack of recap.

As it stands, this chapter is a bit different than ones I've written previously, if only in how it begins, really. I hope you enjoy it, nonetheless, and have a gr8 night or morning or whatever the h*ck you're having at this hour (:*

***EDIT*** lmao so I finally caught up with my generation and made a tumblr and I'm already LIVING for it. I know I'm v late on this but come yell into the void w me --> @spiceydiceyboi ***

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“*It looks different,*” Octavia observed casually, her tone the epitome of nonchalance despite what they were looking at.

“Of course it would, O. We’ve only ever seen it from the inside -,”

“You have, Bell,” she cut her brother off coolly, glancing over at him with a hard line forming across her mouth. He met her gaze levelly, his expression barely containing grave solemnity. “I’ve only ever seen the underside of the floorboards.”

“Well, technically that’s not completely true -,”

“Shut up, Bell.”

The boy quieted immediately, the two falling into tense silence as they looked down the hillside from their hidden rocky perch on the edge of tree cover, neither daring to move scarcely more than a muscle as they ogled what was left of the Ark. It’d fallen to Earth only six days prior, the Commander having immediately sent Bellamy and Octavia to regroup at Anya’s village with Gustus in order to gather intel about the state of what they were already referring to as Skaikru.

There didn’t appear to be any protective perimeter set up, yet – just a few piles of scrap metal and sparse supplies most likely gathered from a scavenge along the outer radius of the crash site here and there. A scattered number of souls wandered about the outside of the wreckage, taking turns looking around them as if waiting for something or someone – anyone – to let them know what to do next, how to live in this new world completely foreign to the one now left to ruin before their eyes.
He wished he could feel sorry for them.

“I should report back to Gustus on all of this first, let him know what -,”

“You annoying him with useless information all the time isn’t going to make him like you any more than he does right now, you know,” Octavia interrupted him once again, her voice cold and sharp like the steel of the blade she now wore on her waist at all times. She was projecting – that much he could tell –, her often strained and tenuous relationship with Indra clearly clouding the dark tone of her voice, but that didn’t mean it stung any less. After all, she knew how he felt...

Gustus was unlike anyone Bellamy had ever met before – all impassivity and fierce loyalty intermingling beneath one of the most intimidating façades he believed anyone could put up, maybe short of the Commander. The man was immovable, implacable, and, at most times, wholly unpleasant to be around, but he... He cared – more than Bellamy had thought possible at first, his tells becoming more noticeable to the boy the more time he spent around the seasoned warrior. Gustus cared about his Commander, his cohorts, and his people with more fire burning in his gut than the boy had believed one person could contain.

It was as admirable as it was fascinating, and there were times when Bellamy thought he could physically see that fire blazing deep within the man’s gaze as he watched his seken train, running him through ruthless drills over and over again to the point where blood and sweat drenching his exterior was almost more familiar to Bellamy these days than being clean. It was never for long, though - and never truly for Bellamy’s eyes to see -, but it was there, and nothing Octavia’s bitterness could manifest would convince him otherwise.

Truth be told, Gustus was the closest thing the boy had ever known to a father figure, and he –

“Holy shit.” Octavia’s exclamation cut through his train of thought abruptly, forcing Bellamy’s eyes to focus back on the direction she was now gawking in, jaw agape.

Emerging from the main entrance to the Ark a couple hundred yards down the hill from the Blake siblings was Thelonius Jaha, the nightmarish figure both of them so despised stepping out from the dark depths of the giant spaceship with none other than Abby Griffin in tow.

Bellamy’s heart dropped to the very pit of his stomach, audibly swallowing as he forced himself to remain put despite the burning desire to charge down the hill and tackle Jaha to the ground with the full force of his weight. He noticed Octavia fidgeting with the handle of her sword out of the corner of his eye, clearly undergoing the same inner battle as her brother, the two of them glued to the scene unfolding before them.

The boy watched as Abby rounded on Jaha and began shouting a torrent of words that was lost to the wind to both Blakes, every inch of the woman’s frame dripping with disdain and fury as she faced an imperious Jaha. Watching Abby let loose on the man, Bellamy couldn’t help but notice how much frailer she appeared than when he’d last seen her, how the protruding bones of her face cast shadows into dips and planes already darkened with obvious exhaustion, her clothes hanging off her body as if made for someone at least two sizes larger.

Truth be told, he owed his life and the lives of his sister and friends to Abby Griffin; he knew it, Octavia knew it – they all knew it. Without her guidance, Bellamy wouldn’t have had the wherewithal to even consider the Chancellor’s Hatch as an option, wouldn’t have even known how to begin getting himself and those he cared about out of the bind someone older and supposedly wiser had forced them into... More than that, though, Abby had been an odd source of comfort and stability in a time that’d offered only chaos and destruction, death and despair. He couldn’t help the way his heart throbbed painfully in his chest as he thought of the sacrifices the older woman had probably made for the group of them from the moment she’d first met them, a bunch of adolescent
strangers with barely a pipe dream of survival in such madness – if only on the whisper of faith that her daughter was still alive –

Bellamy’s heart nearly punched through his chest in that moment, a wave of dizzying grief overwhelming him as he remembered.

Clarke – one of the only friends he’d ever had – the girl who’d discovered this new world for them in all the ways that’d mattered to him, who’d shown them the way and guaranteed their survival out of pure hope for a better tomorrow. The girl who’d sacrificed her own life for near-perfect strangers just so that theirs might have a better chance of coming to some far-off conclusion than hers ever would...

Closing his eyes and inhaling with great difficulty, Bellamy recalled his brief audience with the Commander in the wake of the Ark’s landing days prior, remembering the way she’d looked beyond and through him as he described the probable state they’d probably find the survivors in, a desolate sort of emptiness sucking the life from her features as it’d done for some time now... He remembered immediately feeling like kicking himself upon mentioning Clarke’s mother, the possible presence of Abby Griffin on Earth having been a central focus of Bellamy’s report up until the very moment her name came out of his mouth. The Commander had seemed to snap to attention then, her eyes meeting Bellamy’s as if finally comprehending his presence for the first time in ages – and he’d immediately wished to be invisible to her again.

For, in the brief moment that their eyes had met and she truly saw him, Bellamy’s breath had been stolen, shocked to witness a person trapped and burning alive within the cage of their own mind – a tragic sort of familiarity with such agony having settled there for who knows how long now... The next moment, though, the Commander had been up, turning away from Bellamy and making as if to walk out onto her balcony before remembering him once more, a heavy inhalation lifting the leaden weight of her shoulders. She’d turned back to him then, that empty mask of authority worked back into place atop her features, and had given him his final orders with the precision of one traversing thin ice and knowing the ramifications of opening even the smallest of cracks - her role as leader of all never forgotten despite the side effects of a complete and utter loss of self visibly ailing her.

Bellamy remembered how his chest had warmed as he’d exited the throne room, feeling a sense of admiration and respect swelling deep within him for the Commander despite the aching sorrow weighting his every step away from her. She took more pride and care in her role as a leader than those more than twice her age had ever even contemplated, had more of a mind for longevity and stability of civilization than even those in the books of Before had possessed. Regardless of where it would take him and how things would end up, Bellamy couldn’t help but feel a sense of pride at being a part of something she was at the helm of.

After all, the Commander was the only person in Bellamy’s life – besides Clarke – who’d ever made a promise of something more and actually kept it. That fact, alone, was enough for him – enough for him to know that he’d chosen the right side, that he was doing the best thing for his sister and those he cared about in doing right by those that’d taken them in, given them purpose and protection.

As long as he served under the leadership of Lexa Kom Trikru and all that entailed, Bellamy Blake knew he would never be on the wrong side again.

“You have no idea how much I’ve always wanted to do that,” Octavia’s voice snapped him out of his train of thought once again, opening his eyes just in time to see the tail-end of a slap across Jaha’s face at Abby’s hand, the force of it causing the man to stumble back in alarm.

In the next moment, though, the Chancellor was surging forward, grabbing forcefully onto Abby’s wrist and looming over the woman who seemed to pale in comparison to his size and stature.
Octavia half-unsheathed her blade almost instantaneously, lurching forward as if to sprint to the woman’s aid.

“Don’t, O!” Bellamy hissed, grabbing onto his sister’s forearm and tugging her back down, meeting her incredulous expression with hard eyes. “You know the Commander’s orders – we’re not to act or make ourselves known to them until a full reconnaissance has been completed and reported back to her.” Upon seeing the fire in her eyes stoke even hotter, Bellamy simply sighed, shaking his head a little as he back-tracked slightly.

“We’ve gotta talk to Anya and Gustus, at least.”

Octavia considered this for a moment, gaze flicking back and forth between her brother’s pleading expression and the confrontation unfolding down the hill from them. He saw her war with it for tense moments spent in silence, jaw working as she continued to pull against his grip on her. Finally, though, she huffed, settling back into her spot beside him and fixing him with a steely expression.

“Fine,” she bit out, tone harsh. “We do it your way. If that fucker hurts her, though –”

“He won’t,” Bellamy cut her off immediately, tone just as unforgiving. “We won’t let him.”

After searching her brother’s eyes for a moment to judge the legitimacy of his promise, Octavia nodded, motioning for him to follow as she took off into the woods. Bellamy was on her heels immediately, their steps nearly silent as they hastened through the thick underbrush in the way they’d been trained.

They would report everything they’d seen at the site of the wreckage back to Anya and Gustus, give the warriors every detail they’d gleaned about the state of the Ark’s defense systems and their capacity to farm and provide for themselves, and do everything they could to prove their loyalty to the Ground.

As they ran, Bellamy tried not to think about the face of Abby Griffin, haunted by the shadows of her inner demons but still holding on to hope that her daughter would see past them and embrace her as she’d always done.

He tried not to think of an embrace that would never come…

Clarke woke up.

The effort of doing so was like dragging an iron anchor to the surface of an ocean churning with a relentless hurricane by the strength of her naked ankle, alone, but it was still fruitful somehow.

Breathing, though – breathing was far more difficult…

Blinking against the soft glow of candlelight assaulting her eyes, Clarke nearly gasped for air against what felt like a lead weight pressing down on her chest, panic spiking within her as she realized with increasing clarity that she couldn’t move anything above her ankles without causing her entire body to spasm in agony. Black spots appeared at the edges of her vision as the panic became desperation, her fists clenching and unclenching in the soft sheets below her as her heart pounded at the realization that she might actually begin suffocating –

“Breathe, goufa,” a soft voice cooed from somewhere nearby, intentionally gentle as if to keep from
disturbing even the smallest speck of dust in the room. Clarke didn’t dare turn her head to the sound, too afraid of the darkness closing in around her to move even the smallest of muscles.

She didn’t have to, though; in the very next moment, Anya emerged from the darkness and into the glow of the candlelight in Clarke’s line of sight, her expression carefully bare save for the slightest crease of concern between her brows. The warrior strode over to Clarke’s bedside with quiet steps, sitting down on the edge of the mattress with utmost caution before moving to swipe a cool cloth across the girl’s forehead, hands impossibly gentler than her voice had been.

It was only then that Clarke noticed a similar weight on the other side of the bed, too desperate to remain centered and focused on the warrior beside her to see what it was…

Where is Lexa?

“How did I - ?” Clarke choked on her words, her throat working against solid gravel as she unconsciously shifted towards Anya on the bed, her entire frame screaming in protest as she did so. “Where - ?”

“Hush, Klark,” the warrior cut her off softly, bending out of sight for a moment only to come back into view with a wine goblet full of water in her hand, tipping it up to Clarke’s mouth as the girl accepted the cool liquid gratefully. “You are in your own bed, safe from harm and out of sight… You are safe.”

It wasn’t much, but the words were somehow enough to slow Clarke’s thundering heart to a more aching throb, her body somewhat adjusting to having to take shallower breaths more frequently in order to compensate for the ribs she knew were broken. The weight opposite Anya on the bed seemed to grow heavier in the back of Clarke’s mind as she maintained her focus on the steady warrior currently doting on her.

“How long?” the girl croaked out, the words emerging from her lips on nothing short of a miracle. Anya sighed quietly, placing the cup and cloth out of sight before turning her full focus back on the blonde, every movement a careful calculation.

They shared a weighted gaze for long moments unobserved, the warrior seeming to note every nuance within the other girl’s expression as if searching for a signal that her assistance was needed once more. Seemingly unsatisfied by what she saw there, Anya brought her hand up to cup Clarke’s cheek, her thumb gently stroking along the girl’s cheekbone with more of that uncharacteristic tenderness that was as unnerving as it was comforting.

“Four days,” the warrior answered, her tone revealing nothing as she met Clarke’s widening eyes. “Nykko was there to tend to your wounds immediately, but it was…,” Anya trailed off, gulping as she averted her gaze from the other girl’s for a moment, seemingly gathering her thoughts. “It was…not an easy process, to say the least.”

Clarke closed her eyes then, feeling the urge to take a deeper breath than she knew her body was
currently capable of handling. Thinking back through the fog clouding the events of the Challenge, Clarke remembered cataloguing the majority of her injuries as survivable, relatively easy to recover from. The sword, though… It was through and through, Clarke knew that much, but it was a sword wound, nonetheless – a gaping hole in her shoulder that’d left her vulnerable to everything from infection to death by blood loss.

She shuddered to imagine how the sequence of events had unfolded following her unconsciousness…

Where is she?

“You fought well, Klark,” Anya spoke up again, an undercurrent of something fierce burning through every word. “Though most who fought against you were not warriors by trade, they had all been training in some capacity for much longer than you have, and to hold your own as you did against so many of them after the day you’d had -,” Anya swallowed loudly, averting her gaze from Clarke’s for a moment in a nearly-unprecedented display of nerves as she seemed to be wringing her hands.

“You show great promise,” Anya continued, her tone intense as her gaze fixed upon Clarke’s once more, something as close to fondness as the warrior was capable of possessing sparkling beneath the glass of her eyes. She reached for Clarke’s hand, enclosing it in two of her own dressed in fingerless leather gloves, her sword callouses detectable even through the strong fabric. “You’ve been trained in the basics of some of the most well-respected and successful combat tactics known to our kind, it’s true, but I-I can’t help but think that you might benefit from something more.” There was a current of excitement mingling with the fierceness still present in the warrior’s voice, and it had Clarke unconsciously angling her body more towards Anya despite its screaming protests to stop that.

“Anya, what are you -?”

“I would like to train you, Klark,” the warrior cut her off, squeezing the girl’s hands within her own as Clarke’s eyes blew wide. “I know we’d had a session or so together before the events of the Maunon-de, but that was merely infantile self-defense compared to the things I want to teach you… You possess more capability to excel in combat than anyone I’ve come across in years, and I can’t - ,” Anya choked on her words again, face contorting slightly as she registered her own discomfort at fighting nerves in such a way.

Clarke hadn’t missed the way Anya’s eyes had flickered over to the opposite side of the girl’s bed as she’d spoken of capability in combat, but she still couldn’t manage to tear her eyes away from the warrior as she continued to stun Clarke so.

“I cannot and will not justify leaving you as defenseless prey in the hands of those who wish to hunt you... Not again.” Not after the Mountain. Not after Nia. Not even after the Challenge, for that matter... The words remained unspoken on Anya’s lips, but Clarke heard them all the same. She heard them, and she could barely breathe.

“I…,” Clarke started, squirming slightly against the crushing weight of her own chest as her shoulder screamed in protest over everything and nothing at all. “I want to say yes – more than anything, you know I do. It’s just…,” Clarke trailed off, pouring every ounce of sincerity she contained within her into the gaze she shared with the other woman, Anya still maintaining her grip around the girl’s battered hands. There was so much that Clarke wanted in this moment – so much so that she was beginning to find it difficult to distinguish where the pain of injuries collected stopped and the ache of wanting began…

“I have to go back.” Said aloud, the words were like a punch to the gut from an iron fist, the salt
water of far-off oceans pouring into the cuts adorning her body and the gaping wound in her shoulder, agony. “I have to return to Azgeda, Anya – not now, obviously, but…soon. Too soon to begin something that would kill me not to be able to finish…”

(And Clarke was not, was not, thinking of anything else or anyone else when those words came out of her mouth. She couldn’t – her heart could only bear the brunt of so much sorrow at one time in such a fragile state as she was.)

The light in Anya’s eyes had dulled to a mere flicker now, the warrior hanging her head slightly to nod, a heavy sigh taking the stiffness out of her shoulders in a dejected sort of movement. After a moment of silence and Clarke trying to keep the water in her eyes from welling too obviously, Anya looked up again, unclasping Clarke’s hands to run gentle fingertips across the girl’s hairline, soothing. Clarke’s eyes fluttered shut despite herself, once again aching with the need to fill her lungs with far more air than she was currently allowed.

“We…need not discuss such things now, goufa,” the warrior acquiesced, her voice barely more than a whisper as she continued her gentle ministrations through Clarke’s hair. “Your only duty now is to yourself, to rest and gather your strength for a time in the near future when that time no longer belongs to you.” The rough pad of a thumb swiped down, catching the single tear that was making its way unbidden down Clarke’s cheek. She needed to breathe…

“I must go find Nyko and let him know that you are awake. He’ll be wanting to re-dress your injuries soon enough.” Clarke’s eyes barely fluttered open in time to see Anya making her way from the dimly-lit room, the unmistakable sting of lips pressed to bare skin flaring up on the girl’s forehead.

How far we’ve come, old friend, and under such dreadful circumstances…

“Clarke?”

That sound, the sweetest of summons, caused Clarke to nearly snap her neck in whipping around towards it, finally chancing to look at the weight on the other side of her bed in Anya’s absence.

It was Lexa – of course it was Lexa, her head having been situated in the crook of her crossed arms where they were pressing down into the mattress.

The girl was up and standing above Clarke before she could blink, a trembling hand coming over to swipe the blonde hair tickling at Clarke’s brow and cheekbones out of the way with painstaking care. Her expression…

God, Clarke didn’t think anything else could make her heart throb throughout every inch of her skin like the look on Lexa’s face was doing now, having only ever been exposed to it once before and wishing with every ounce of her being to never have to see it again. It was nearly impossible to describe – like the feeling one gets when watching something precious bleed out right before their eyes with hands tied, captured in the planes and shadows of one’s face for all to see. Like the pain of a knife sheathed deep in the warmth of vital organs being twisted by the hands of one you love, as unexpected in its intensity as the pierce of blade to skin in the first place.

Like watching the love of your life take a sword through her back while you could do nothing but watch from a distance, helpless.

“Clarke?” Lexa repeated, her hands coming up to cup the other girl’s face gently, glassy eyes darting wildly across every inch of Clarke’s face, scanning for any sign of pain or discomfort. She, like Anya, apparently didn’t like what she was seeing. “What do you need? What can I do? I -,”
“Lexa,” Clarke cut in softly, her voice barely more than a whisper with the effort it was taking for her to draw breath at this point. Lexa stopped her fussing immediately, going rigid as she stared down into Clarke’s pained face, growing more and more distraught in her helplessness with every passing second.

*My fault…*

Clarke just shook her head, her left hand searching on the mattress to grab onto some of the loose fabric of Lexa’s long coat that’d pooled on the edge of the bed. Lexa’s face remained contorted in a mask of desperation warring with desolation, and it was stealing the hard-fought wisps of oxygen hidden deep within the blonde’s chest right from her person, magnifying the leaden weight already pressing down on her there.

It simply wouldn’t do.

“I’m here, Lexa… I’m here, and I’m okay.” Forcing that many words out in sequence was enough to leave Clarke gasping for air, but that didn’t matter. Nothing did, not when Lexa was looking at her like that – like Clarke was going to disappear before her eyes at any second.

“I’m okay.”

And, just like that, Lexa fell apart.

A sob ripped from somewhere deep in her chest, the girl clapping a hand over her mouth to stifle the sound before bending forward to pepper Clarke’s forehead with kisses, her hands everywhere and nowhere all at once. Clarke could tell Lexa was holding back, treating her as this delicate thing that could break at even the slightest amount of force or quick movement. The girl was purposefully hovering above the blonde, keeping her body weight wholly separate from Clarke, her movements carefully composed and in check despite the slight tremor that could be detected across every inch of her skin.

Clarke allowed the distance, though, recognizing that she couldn’t possibly fathom the torrent of emotions that’d probably been experienced since the conclusion of her Challenge. It was the least she could do at this point, really, to offer herself up to simply *be* – to be touched, to be held, to be watched carefully, to be doted upon, to be *loved*… If only in the hopes that Lexa would start believing again.

After moments unspoken, Clarke finally began to notice the moonlight spilling through the large window in her room coupling with the candlelight that her eyes had finally adjusted to, and she found an odd sense of calmness washing over her juxtaposed with the soft hiccups of breath Lexa took as the girl quieted. Their foreheads were pressed together now, Clarke doing her best to temper her stunted breathing to the pace of Lexa’s, the girl’s still-trembling fingers carding gently through Clarke’s hair at a tempo that threatened to lull her back into a much more peaceful sleep.

They’d found their moment again, allowing time to stretch and thrum all around them as they remained still, simply relishing in the feeling of knowing that they were together, they were safe, and they could *breathe* – more figuratively than literally for Clarke at this point, but breathe all the same. They were connected by multiple points of touch, Lexa ever the gentle soul as she poured as much tenderness into every loving ministration and kiss to Clarke’s skin as she could manage without accidentally jarring the girl in any pain-exacerbating way.

The moment pulled on them both, and Clarke could feel it tugging at the back of her mind like a tide forced back to sea.
A soft knock on the door caused Lexa’s head to snap up, her posture going rigid and her
ministrations halting as she seemed to coil within herself in preparation to strike.

“Heda?” Nyko’s soft voice came to them muffled, the healer’s caution evident even within the small
syllable. “Onya told me that I should come check on the skai prisa…” He trailed off, an unspoken
question caught on the end of the phrase.

Lexa’s shoulders deflated immediately, a long exhale of breath pulling her head down to press
against Clarke’s once more, her hands twitching where they loosely cradled the girl’s head.

“Enter,” the Commander called back, her eyes fixing on Clarke’s once more with that familiar glow
of reverence burning within them even as Nyko entered the room, closing the door carefully behind
him.

Clarke was instantly mesmerized by the gaze, her eyes never leaving Lexa’s for a moment even as
Nyko began to move all around them, murmuring soft words of reassurance that were no more
discernible to her now than the lost words drifting on the cool breeze blowing outside of her
window. The moment had captured her again, lulling her into a deep serenity that was almost as
foreign to her as the feeling of safety engulfing her now, Lexa’s gentle fingers having picked up their
tender exploration once more.

As Clarke’s eyes fluttered shut, she couldn’t help but feel the soft note of ephemerality lingering on
the very edge of that moment, a note that sung of problems yet unsolved and sorrows yet unfelt...

*Tomorrow’s problem…It’s always tomorrow’s problem, isn’t it?*

The moment snapped, and Clarke found herself falling back into perfect blackness.

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The marketplace was alive.

Every corner of it pulsed, breathed life into her bones, and Clarke couldn’t help as the corner of her
mouth ticked up despite the weight of her own body pressing her towards the dirt.

It was slow going, and she was drenched in sweat from head to toe, her clothing sticking to her skin
as the salty droplets kept dripping into her eyes. The pain in her shoulder throbbed throughout her entire body where her arm was situated in a sling, the sheer force of the sensation enough to set her teeth on edge. She’d only managed to go about twenty steps outside of the Tower so far – all but dragging her leg behind her as she went –, but if she could just get a bit further –

“The pure depth of concern in Lexa’s voice halted Clarke in her tracks, the girl’s hand coming up to the soaked fabric of the tunic on Clarke’s back as her other hand came around to rest on the blonde’s good shoulder, feather-light. “I think you’ve pushed yourself far enough for the day…Why don’t we go back inside? Perhaps I can read to you some more…”

Clarke fought the urge to sigh in frustration – not at Lexa, never at Lexa, but at her own body for keeping her trapped in such a way, from preventing her from even drawing enough breath to sigh in the first place. It’d been six days since Clarke had woken up, and she was only just now able to get far enough away from the hulking structure that she could feel the sun on her face again…

The previous days had been spent mostly in bed, Clarke forced to remain idle while the rest of the capitol seemed to hum with life and constant hustle all around her, and it was starting to drive her insane.

Echo and Roan had taken turns sitting in on festival’s Summit meetings while Clarke remained in her room, the bulk of legitimate trade discussion postponed until a later date at which the Queen of Azgeda would actually be able to make an appearance again. Her advisors kept her abreast of everything, though, giving her minute-by-minute details of encounters with leaders that were showing interest in the potential development of diplomatic relations with the Ice Nation now that Clarke was at the helm. Upon even the slightest mention of Blue Cliff or any of the other clans that’d taken part in the Challenge, though, the advisors would practically rear up, both of them expressing a plethora of colorful desires when it came to those particular diplomatic dealings… Clarke took it all with a grain of salt, though, not allowing herself to focus too much on anything that might destabilize her breathing patterns for any length of time, the task of simply living and getting well proving to be more than enough to keep her mind occupied.

Outside of the formal gatherings of clan leaders that took up much of the day, Lexa stole away in stealth at every possible moment to be by Clarke’s side, having assigned Anya to the girl’s personal guard in her absence and all but sentencing Clarke to her room in the interest of optimal protection. To anyone paying close enough attention to Lexa’s whereabouts outside of formal meetings – many of whom probably believed the girl to be stealing away to her chambers more frequently than anything else –, the Commander’s attentiveness to the new Queen of Azgeda simply appeared a formality, a means of maintaining a relationship tested by the Challenge in more ways than one, all manner of suspicion reasonably quashed the moment Clarke had chosen to accept it…

Wells and Raven were near-constant visitors, both of them seeming to take turns looking after Clarke as if she were some delicate child who needed constant supervision despite them having witnessed her take down a great number of warriors in cold blood. If any of the attention was unintentionally patronizing, Clarke simply chose to ignore it, instead focusing on regulating the pace of her breathing – a task that continued to prove the most difficult of anything she’d done in quite some time, Challenge notwithstanding. (Truth be told, the doting attention being paid to her on a constant basis was a brilliant change of pace for Clarke, and it was the first time in her life that she’d actually found an odd sort of enjoyment in letting someone else tell her what to do for a little while – regardless of how much it made her feel like a small girl back on the Ark once more.)

Bellamy, Octavia, and Lincoln, on the other hand, were busying themselves in a different way, all
three having thrown themselves into the task of sorting out the bell issue at the Commander’s bequest. Clarke hadn’t seen any of the warriors since the Challenge, but Echo kept assuring her that they were making progress, combing through Polis with fine-toothed precision to round up every single one of the children’s bells that tormented Clarke so. Once they did so, the standing order was to burn them all and forbid any instrument maker or metalsmith from re-creating that particular model in any capacity – no questions asked.

No one seemed to want to talk about the steps that needed to be taken afterwards, but Clarke knew – she knew she’d have to undergo some manner of exposure therapy in order to build up her resistance to the sound, but she wasn’t exactly sure what that would entail just yet, far too concerned with not dying from anything else to think about it too much. As it were, though, Clarke could barely stay on her feet for more than fifteen minutes at a time without some part of her body screaming in protest, but she wouldn’t actually admit it out loud, simply allowing her poorly-schooled facial expressions to give away all that which she wished to conceal.

She supposed she’d simply have to hope that Anya was true to her word…

“I’m alright, Lex – really,” Clarke reassured the other girl quietly, throwing a haphazard glance over her shoulder and hoping that it was fleeting enough that Lexa couldn’t read too much into the sour contortion of her features.

Before Clarke could take another step forward, though, Lexa was in front of her, because of course – of course – the girl had seen the discomfort written all over Clarke’s face. The Commander fixed her with a hard look – though dancing with secret adoration and careful tenderness as it always was as of late –, arms crossing in front of her chest as she appeared to become cut from marble, an immovable obstacle now stationed in Clarke’s path to freedom.

Sighing exasperatedly enough to set her entire chest cavity alight, Clarke hung her head, wishing with an ache burning deep within her gut that she could close the short distance between their bodies, longing to rest her head on Lexa’s shoulder for just a moment –

Clarke heard a sharp intake of breath in front of her as Lexa lurched forward, almost catching the blonde in an embrace as she supported Clarke’s weight completely, the girl not having realized that she’d been pitching forward. The next moment, the Commander had one arm wrapped around Clarke’s waist and the other draping the girl’s good arm around her shoulder, her movements gentle yet determined as the blonde found herself being spun around and directed right back towards the lower Tower doors.

Clarke groaned dramatically, every muscle in her torso tensing against the throbbing pain in her ribs at having someone’s weight pressed against them, no matter how carefully…

“Not too much further, ai hodnes,” Lexa cooed in her ear, all but supporting Clarke’s full weight in her arms now. They were back inside the safety of the torch-lit hallway leading towards the lift, a different kind of blackness closing in around the blonde’s vision far too quickly now...

The last thing Clarke remembered before she lost track of consciousness completely was the sensation of quite literally being swept off her feet, the sweetest of smells engulfing her as her favorite voice guided her into the blackness...
“Consider yourself as having an open invitation to Azgeda any time you’d like, ambassador,” Clarke murmured over the soft din of the room, bowing slightly in a gesture of respect towards the elderly Lake woman standing before her. The woman returned the gesture in kind, inclining her head to Clarke before turning on her heels to be absorbed back into the crowd of the other gathered leaders and their advisors.

Certain that fewer eyes were on her than only moments before, Clarke allowed herself to sway a little on her feet, a wave of exhaustion flowing from her toes up to the top of her scalp as she ground her teeth against it, her shoulder throbbing in accentuation. She was doing well, all things considered, her presence at the final gathering of leaders at the Summit a thing of great interest to the majority of those present in the throne room.

“Not too much longer now,” Echo’s voice came from her left, the usual edge of annoyance and wariness clearly present there.

The woman sidled up to the blonde in the next moment, her presence having been required at the bequest of Roan who’d been commandeered to assist Bellamy and Lincoln with something earlier that day. Clarke didn’t meet her advisor’s gaze, too concerned with breathing through the black spots in her vision to mind the woman’s feelings.

“I admit that I wouldn’t have had your level of…restraint had I been in your position…” Clarke shrugged with her good shoulder, shooting a weighted glance over at Echo before motioning for the woman to follow her towards the back wall, a more secluded location for them to converse. She and Echo tucked themselves behind a large multi-tiered candelabra, their faces hidden in shadow.

“The Lake People are on board for re-opening trade channels through the northern-most section of our joint border along the river. Laika said she would be sending scouts to inspect the state of our ports as early as a month from now.” Echo nodded, clearly pleased with this development.

“Rock Line are willing to re-consider terms, as well, and Thorn alluded to a potential subsidy headed our way in lieu of replacements for the mineral shortage our metal smiths have been dealing with for the past few months,” the warrior responded in kind, removing a rolled scroll from the inside of her waistband and handing it to Clarke. She unrolled it, taking in the crudely-drawn outline of their shared borders with the corner of her mouth ticking up.

“Trikru is a given trading partner now,” Echo continued in hushed excitement, an obvious glint in her eyes now, “and the Desert Clan has nothing to offer but neutrality, which means our borders are all-but secured for the first time in decades apart from –,”

“Queen Clarke.” A booming male voice cut the warrior off, startling both women slightly with the sheer volume of the address.

A grave chill ran down Clarke’s spine as she stepped out of the shadows towards the origin of the sound, her teeth setting on edge as she struggled to maintain a reasonable breathing pattern. Tarek met her gaze with smugness oozing from every shadow and plain of his face, flashing a blinding grin that had Clarke itching to sock him right in those too-perfect teeth.

“I’m so very pleased to have you with us finally,” the man continued, tone dripping with thinly-veiled disingenuousness. “I trust the recovery is going well, then?”

Clarke ground her teeth together, the only indication of her having heard him in an otherwise forcefully-neutral expression. She felt Echo at her back immediately, the warrior’s fury evident even
out of sight as she was. Clarke tried not to focus on the crowd parting in her left periphery, making room for the Commander hastening down the steps to her throne towards them...

“No thanks to you,” Clarke bit back, her voice subarctic to match the chill freezing the gloss of her eyes over.

To her utter dismay, Tarek threw back his head and laughed at that, a barking sound that seemed to reverberate from the hole in her shoulder down to the cracks in her ribs. He made a show of it, too, wiping his eyes as all surrounding attention now seemed to be directed at the two leaders radiating with impending confrontation. The Commander was mere steps from Clarke now, every rigid line of her frame appearing to be poised to parry a strike at any moment.

“I don’t suppose you needed my help, though, did you?” Tarek continued, his eyes glinting with unspoken malice as he prepared to go in for the kill.

He wouldn’t dare...

“After all, the Commander seemed to be more than happy to act at your disposal -,”

His words were abruptly cut off by the crush of breath leaving his lungs, his back slamming into the wall near the door with the full force of Clarke’s weight on his person, her hunting knife situated in her left hand and digging into the skin of his neck. The telltale sound of metal sliding against leather as multiple swords were hastily unsheathed coupled with the blood roaring in Clarke’s ears, the pain of her injuries momentarily forgotten as adrenaline coursed through her veins.

Tarek’s eyes were blown wide in shock, momentarily stunned and breathless by Clarke’s sudden assault.

“You seem to have gotten a false first impression of me somewhere along the line,” Clarke hissed at him, her tone frigid and unforgiving. “Allow me to correct it.”

She readjusted her position slightly so that the brunt of her uninjured shoulder was pressing directly into Tarek’s sternum, her left hand holding steady to the blade that was now biting into his skin and drawing a thin sliver of blood. The fair-haired man squirmed a little in discomfort but didn’t dare move a muscle beyond that, wincing as his thick swallow cut deeper into her blade.

“Let it be known once and for all that I am not, nor will I ever be, Nia… I am not cruel, I have a pretty firm grip on the reality of things, if I do say so, myself, and I know a thing or two about diplomacy.” On that note, the tone of Clarke’s voice slipped into the rigidity of formalities.

“However, that doesn’t mean you can take advantage of my diplomatic restraint by using me as a political scapegoat whenever you feel the need to make a power play… Until I’m notified otherwise, I expect you and your clan to operate within the jurisdictions of the Coalition just as Azgeda will now do the same.” Tarek squirmed some more as Clarke held firm, her shoulder digging further into his chest as his face contorted in pain.

“If you’ve got a problem with me, at least have the decency to say it to my face next time instead of calling up ancient traditions to get someone else to do your dirty work for you.”

In one swift movement, Clarke withdrew her knife and drew the man in close by the scruff of his collar only to throw him back harder into the wall in the next moment, causing his head to slam back into the stones with a firm smack as she spun around to sweep his feet out from under him in the direction of her kick. As Tarek went crashing gracelessly to the floor, Clarke sheathed her blade, flicking her long cloak out with a touch of drama before making towards the door, stopping in the doorway only to throw a nonchalant glance over her shoulder to add:
“Oh, and do consider this my own personal invitation for you to grace Azgeda with your presence at any time – I’d be most pleased to welcome you, myself.”

With that, Clarke turned and strode out of the room, guns smoking, Echo hot on her heels as she stormed down the hall, into the staircase, and blindly covered the distance to her room wherein her advisor slammed the door shut behind them.

Clarke’s blazing stride guided her to the center of the room where she halted abruptly, stuck in the wake of a throbbing ache suddenly washing over her from multiple points of origin. She stood there in silence for countless moments, simply trying to breathe through the pain of her injuries coming back to engulf her in their maelstrom once again. Loosing a heavy sigh, Clarke brought her good hand up to pinch the bridge of her nose in time with a sudden outburst of joyous laughter from behind her back.

“That,” Echo coughed out between fits of laughter, “was one of the best things I’ve ever seen you do – short of beheading Nia, of course.” The warrior lost her voice to guffaws once more as Clarke turned to face her, immediately rolling her eyes at the sight of Echo doubled over in delight.

“If I could throw you up against a wall and kiss you, I –,”

“There will be no throwing of any kind against any walls for the foreseeable future as far as I’m concerned,” Clarke interjected, shaking her head and fighting a smile as Echo fell into laughter once more. “I think there’s been enough of that for one day.”

What felt like mere moments later, the sound of the bedroom doors opening drew Echo’s laughter up short, both women fixing their gazes on the lone figure of the Commander nearly gliding over the threshold with her usual gracefulness. The level mask was firmly in place atop her features, Lexa only having to fix Echo with the briefest of looks before the warrior acquiesced, bowing her head in respect to them both with a sly grin dancing across her lips and making her way from the room. Clarke watched her advisor leave, the smallest of smiles playing on her features as she watched Echo’s shoulders shake with quiet chuckles as the doors closed at her back.

Before Clarke even had the chance to even look at Lexa, though, the girl was on her, arms wrapping around Clarke’s neck with as much mindfulness for the blonde’s injuries as she could manage in that moment, her lips capturing Clarke’s in a searing kiss guaranteed to leave a mark on them both for years to come. On instinct, Clarke’s good hand went up to thread through Lexa’s braided hair, pulling the girl closer and closing the space between their bodies despite how Clarke’s entire frame still protested against it so.

Clarke didn’t pay it much mind, though.

For the first time in what felt like a lifetime, she was losing herself to a feeling, this visceral sort of longing blossoming in every corner of her soul and setting her skin alight with brilliant flames. Feeling a forgotten sort of hunger flare up in the pit of her stomach, Clarke pressed even closer to Lexa, running her tongue along the other girl’s lower lip and nearly combusting at the carnal moan the movement loosed in response. In the next breath, both girls were fully engrossed in the erotic rhythm of push and pull, give and take, all pretense of Commander and Queen forgotten at the door. Clarke could feel herself being pushed back towards the bed, more than happy to fall into step as her hand came down to fumble with the clasps of Lexa’s long coat –

A sharp knock on the door startled them apart, both girls wrenching back and hurrying to collect themselves as their desire for something more morphed into a desire to maintain a well-kept secret…

“Enter,” the Commander called only moments later, all evidence of Lexa tucked away as the
Aplana stepped back into Clarke’s place, as well. The doors opened in the next second to reveal a grave-looking Gustus, the hulking warrior’s face contorted into an expression that pressed against Clarke’s already-tightened chest with great force. She glanced sideways at Lexa’s expression, slightly surprised to find a crease forming between the girl’s brows.

“If this is about how I closed the formal hearings of the Summit, I don’t want to hear of it –,”

“No, Heda,” the man cut her off solemnly, mouth forming a hard line as he came to a halt only feet in front of them, arms clasped behind his back as his expression continued to darken. “I am afraid I come bearing troubling news…” He trailed off, clearing his throat of uncharacteristic nerves as the Commander motioned for him to continue. He sighed heavily after a moment, more burdened than Clarke had ever seen him before.

“I have just been delivered another…a-a child has been reported missing, the fourth of the Plain Riders in less than two months… That marks the thirteenth report across all clan lines so far.”

Clarke’s eyebrows shot up, utterly taken aback as she turned to gawk at Lexa, her heart squeezing uncomfortably at the expression on the girl’s face. Utter devastation – that’s what was making itself known on the Commander’s features now, her eyes closing momentarily as she appeared to be breathing through the news. Clarke wished she could do the same.

“When?” Lexa responded after a moment, the single syllable coming out immensely pained. Gustus visibly swallowed, shifting uncomfortably on his feet.

“The messenger made his way to Polis as quickly as possible on horseback, but given the distance from the Plain’s eastern-most border to the capitol… Nearly three weeks ago now. That is when the child – a girl no more than four – was first reported missing by her parents.” Gustus was looking just as pained now as the Commander had sounded, his eyes flickering over to meet Clarke’s as if in unspoken apology. “They are horse-breeders by trade, a family well-respected throughout their clan for providing quality mares to the Plains warriors – no known enemies to speak of.”

Lexa was pacing between Clarke and Gustus now, her fist pressed to her mouth as she appeared to have fallen into the throes of deep contemplation. Clarke looked helplessly to Gustus, eyes widening in silent plea. Upon meeting her gaze for longer than a fleeting moment, the dark-haired man seemed to remember himself, jaw working slightly as his expression flashed with something Clarke couldn’t quite place.

What on earth is going on?!

“I…that isn’t all, I’m afraid,” Gustus continued hesitantly, meeting Clarke’s gaze with the strangest expression on his face as Lexa stopped in her tracks near the window, turning with clipped movements to face him, expression frigid. “There is someone waiting at the city gate for you, Aplana –,”

“Clarke!”

All three warriors turned just in time to see Raven crashing through the bedroom doors, face pale and glistening with sweat as she fixed Clarke with a look that sent a chill thundering down her spin, all variants of terror flashing through the mechanic’s eyes.

“Raven? Is everything -?”

“I tried to stop her,” Raven interrupted Clarke, the girl coming forward into the room a couple steps only to stop and bend forward, placing her hands on her knees and breathing hard. “I tried to make
her stop, but I—I couldn’t, she wouldn’t…” Raven trailed off, shaking her head as her breath came in
gasps, fixing her gaze on the floor as she continued to heave.

Brows furrowing in concern and confusion, Clarke moved towards her friend, hand extended as if to
place on Raven’s shoulder in comfort, feeling startlingly helpless now.

What on earth – ?

The next moment, though, time, itself, seemed to come to a screeching halt, throwing all things
subservient to its force into a disarray as the very ground beneath Clarke’s feet began to crumble,
sending her tumbling towards a certain death far, far below.

For, in that moment, another figure had emerged on the other side of the doorway, someone
comprised of the stuff of both nightmares and wildest dreams – someone Clarke had all but taken for
granted that she’d never see again…

Abby Griffin, in the flesh.

Looking at her daughter as if she barely recognized her at all.

Chapter End Notes

Some notes:
1. Yes, Jaha did come down on the main part of the Ark with everyone else. All of that
is to be unpacked quite soon, but I'm sure you're all picking up what I'm putting down
here: no City of Light storyline !!! I honestly hated that plot line so much in the show
despite how cool the idea of an artificially-maintained collective consciousness actually
is, and since I'm the captain of this gratuitous ship fic, I've decided to do away with it
completely - which also means a completely original back story that I'm honestly v
excited to start revealing to you guys piece by piece, if I haven't already started doing so
(hint hint)...(;  
2. I'm still pacing the chapters along with the emotions I'm trying to convey through
Clarke - i.e. drawn-out sequences for anticipation/anxiety/mental state reflection vs. fast-
paced sequences for plot-driven happenings. I'm hoping it's coming across as I'm
envisioning in my head, but who honestly knows at this point lmaooo
3. As far as a chapter or segment from Lexa's POV is concerned, I'm considering it. I
still really like the idea of her mindset being revealed through interaction with and
observation from other characters, alone, but I'm definitely mulling it over... Tbd.
4. And finally, thank you to everyone who continues to comment and show this story
love with every new update. You all are honestly wonderful, and I read each comment
with a big ole goofy grin on my face. I can't possibly thank you enough for bringing me
such joy in that way, so hopefully my more frequent updates will be received in kind <3

Hope to see you all for the next one soon!!
Recap:
In the wake of Clarke's completion of the Challenge of Five, she struggled to find the strength within herself to grapple with all of the problems currently lingering at her feet. When Gustus suddenly bursts in and delivers a report of another missing child from the Plain Riders clan, Clarke thinks she's got a completely different battle on her hands. That it, until her mom comes busting through the door and looks at her for the first time in over a year - looks at her as if she doesn't know her anymore, that is...

Chapter Notes

^^^^ I tried the recap thing. Who knows if it's helpful, but it's there nonetheless.

I hope you're all doing well!!! Sorry for the longer wait between updates - this one took me a bit longer as it's 11k words of heavy-hitting stuff (hopefully). I also started a new story cause I'm trash and can't just do one thing at a time lmao.

ANYWAYS, I hope you like this one - it's a big boi, if I do say so myself.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Wells turned the golden coin in his pants pocket over for what felt like the hundredth time since getting off his horse, unable to keep his hands steady otherwise.

He glanced over at the Commander beside him, finding little comfort in the utterly blank expression settled on the girl’s face. She hadn’t said a word to him since they’d left Bellamy and Octavia in TonDC earlier that morning, and it was beginning to fray against his nerves like knife on string.

The Ark was but two-hundred yards in front of them now, in the exact shape and condition that Bellamy had described to them not too long ago. It loomed closer and closer into view like a growing storm cloud, and Wells couldn’t help the twinge in his gut as he ogled the hulking thing from the outside for the first time in his life.

It wasn’t anything like he’d expected it to be – not the endless stretch of metallic labyrinths that he and Clarke had explored as children, the vast and never-ending universe that’d appeared to present nothing but opportunity to those who called it home. The older he’d gotten, though, the clearer he saw, and the more he’d come to resent everything the Ark represented – the never-ending cycles, the suffocating regulations, the soul-sucking relationship with his father whom he couldn’t picture now without a tinge of red coloring his vision …
“It would be best if you spoke first,” the Commander chimed in suddenly, causing Wells to whip around towards her as they walked forward. There was no emotion in her voice, no indication that she was really present beside him, but he complied nonetheless.

“Of course, Heda.”

They were less than a hundred yards from the main entrance to the Ark now, breaking somewhat of an invisible barrier comprised of haphazardly stacked shrapnel at various intervals. Wells barely had time to draw his next breath before the atmosphere stilled around him.

“Stop right there! Put your hands where I can see them!”

Shouts and commands came from multiple directions to the tune of guns being cocked, safeties being removed. Wells stopped in his tracks immediately, putting his hands up above his head as the Commander remained neutral beside him, hand situated loosely on the handle of her longsword.

“I said, put your hands up!!” one of the voices shouted again, most likely directed at the Commander who seemed utterly unmoved by it all.

“Jones, it’s me! It’s Wells!!” Wells shouted back, eyes searching the faces of the armed guards slowly circling them now, guns locked and loaded on the two intruding figures. “Put the damn guns down – it’s Wells Jaha!!”

Wells had known their arrival wouldn’t be well-received at first, and he’d done the best he could to prepare the Trikru warriors stationed in the far woods and hidden along the perimeter of the Ark for such a scenario, but he didn’t know how long their patience would last with weapons pointed at their Commander. He couldn’t say he blamed them …

“Jones, I swear to god if you don’t …”,

“Wells?”

It wasn’t the voice he’d expected to hear first, hesitant and disbelieving as it seemed to come from far off.

Wells craned his neck above the firing squad closing in on him and the Commander, looking for the source of the sound.

“Wells!!”

The next moment, Wells was nearly knocked off his feet by the force of Abby Griffin slamming into him, the older woman wrapping him in a bear-like hold upon having pushed her way through the encroaching gunmen. Wells was stunned to stillness for moments after that, overwhelmed by the need to catch his breath as Abby cried into his chest, gripping onto his uniform with a force like iron. He came back to himself after a moment, though, moving to cradle her head in his hand and return her hug in kind. He spared a glance at the Commander beside him, surprised to see something like recognition settling atop her features, eyes widening slightly in a paling face. Wells was helpless to do anything about it, though, fighting against gravity to keep him and Abby vertical.

“Wh-what are you doing here? How did you –?” Abby was blubbering before him now, reaching up to grab his face with trembling hands as he looked down at her, eyes watery and wholly emotional.

“Abby – Abby, listen to me,” Wells commanded her, voice soft yet urgent as he grasped on to the
woman’s shoulders, forcing her to focus on him through her tears. “I can explain everything – all of this – if we can just get somewhere to talk in private –.”

“Where’s Clarke?” she interrupted him suddenly, eyes wildly scanning the direction from which he’d come and landing back on him in panic, confusion. Wells winced at the name before he could stop himself, causing Abby’s face to light with alarm.

She placed her hands on his forearms where he grasped her, eyes widening with every passing second. “Where is she?! I need to – ,”

“All will be explained in time if you allow us an audience,” assured the Commander from beside Wells, voice calm and cool as she startled both him and Abby for very different reasons, the older woman seeming to register the other girl’s presence for the first time and startling at her perfect English.

Abby turned to gawk at the Commander, mouth falling open in an otherwise stunned expression as her eyes darted over every inch of the girl, lingering unsubtly on the extensive weapons belt where the Commander’s hand still rested.

“Who is – ?”

“Like I said, I can explain everything if you just give me the chance,” Wells cut her off, voice almost pleading now as the guns behind Abby’s back seemed to grow larger in his mind’s eye.

He felt utterly and completely exposed, ticking time bombs on all sides as he, once again, doubted the continued patience of the Trikru warriors stationed along the perimeter with the Ark Guard closing in before him.

Abby seemed to register his urgency with the flip of some internal switch, taking one last lingering look at the Commander before turning to the gunmen, signaling for them to stand down. Reluctantly – and much to Wells’s surprise – they complied, lowering their weapons and allowing for Abby to lead the two intruders through their thin ranks and up to the main doors.

As they walked, Abby continued to shout orders at lingering bystanders, all of it going unheard by Wells who walked forward as if in a trance, the Commander keeping stride beside him and seeming as unmoved as stone.

Wells’s stomach was flipping end over end, his heart thundering in his chest as Abby led them up and over the threshold of the Ark and into the dimly-lit corridor, the artificial overhead lights stinging his eyes much more tangibly then he ever remembered them doing. The older woman was weaving them through various hallways now, forcing Wells and the Commander to keep up as she led them past numerous passages and gateways, the eyes of loitering onlookers glued to the two intruders as Wells gathered from their murmurings that they failed to recognize him in Grounder uniform with a full beard.

“Not too much further now,” Abby promised over her shoulder, hastening on in a manner familiar to Wells, painfully reminiscent of the former surgeon who used to sprint from supply-keep to operating room with armfuls of medicine, shoving and shouting her way through any and every obstacle to get back to her patient.

Wells chanced a sideways glance at the Commander, watching as the girl seemed to be memorizing the path on which they were traveling while simultaneously fighting the awe at her surroundings from working its way too obviously onto her features. It was the first time in many a month that he’d seen her look anything other than empty, and it was enough to bring a small smile to his face as
Abby turned a corner and stopped abruptly at a single steel door, moving to type some passcode into the keypad as Wells’ nerves fully caught up to him.

They slammed head-on into his chest, causing him to gulp for air slightly as he fought to keep still, to keep from sprinting back through the tangle of hallways and out into freedom. He knew what probably awaited him in that room—the unspoken elephant by his side from the moment he’d gotten into the Chancellor’s Hatch with Bellamy and the others, the shadow from which he could never escape: his father.

Wells had never even begun to know how to prepare himself to see the man again, to come face-to-face with the one person in his life that he truly despised, wanted nothing more than to stay as far away from as possible. It was all he could do to contain a whimper from coming out of his mouth, to keep his feet in place as the metallic door swung open—

What the—?

Much to Wells’ utter and complete astonishment, the lone figure sitting at a rectangular table situated in the center of the room was not his father, but Marcus Kane, his father’s right-hand man who’d always seemed to have something close to a soul situated somewhere deep in his core—much unlike Wells’ father whom he so closely followed.

Abby motioned for Wells and the Commander to follow her into the room as Kane got up from his seat, jaw going slack as his eyes found the Commander and something like a smile ghosting across his features at the sight of her in all her done-up glory.

The door clicked shut, hissing behind them, and Wells tried not to wince as the Commander seemed to bristle at the sound, her jaw clenching in his periphery as the hand on her sword went white-knuckled. Before he could reassure her, though, he found himself engulfed in Marcus Kane’s arms, the man apparently having come around the table to greet Wells much to the boy’s surprise.

“It’s good to have you back with us,” Kane whispered into the shell of Wells’ ear, the genuine feeling flowing through the words causing a lump to form in Wells’ throat, speechless.

“W-where’s my dad?” Wells forced out after Kane released him, the question causing the man’s face to fall to a frown, immediately sobered.

He shared a look with Abby who had her gaze fixed on the Commander, Kane’s glance momentarily diverting her and causing her to share his frown.

“We … wanted to talk to you about that, actually,” Abby answered for Kane, each word carefully chosen as she watched Kane extend his hand to the Commander, the girl startlting him by grasping the space before his elbow as he stood in fascination at the gesture.

“He’s been … temporarily removed from office until further notice—until we can get our bearings on the ground, at the very least,” Abby explained after a moment, her tone as diplomatic as though Wells and the Commander were simply two more subjects from the Ark to whom she needed to explain the situation.

The Commander glanced over at Wells with a raised brow as Kane moved to stand beside Abby who’d made her way to the other side of the table, sinking down into the chair as if her body was just now processing how exhausted it was.

“A lot has happened since I saw you last, but I suspect it’s been the same for you down here,” Abby continued wearily, eyes glued to the Commander the entire time as the girl remained stoic,
immoveable.

“ You first, ” Wells responded after another moment, growing tired of the four-way staring contest he appeared to be caught in the middle of against his will.

Abby sighed heavily, pinching the bridge of her nose and nodding to Kane who pursed his lips, looking nearly apologetic now.

“ You can take it from here, ” Abby told the other man, sounding unquestionable as the man simply nodded, drawing breath to begin their tale...

It was worse than Wells had expected – infinitely so, really.

For all that Kane was saying, the only thought that truly settled in Wells’s mind was that his father had actually lost his mind, had gone absolutely off the rails from the moment the Chancellor’s Hatch had been launched.

Apparently, the moment the pod had detached from the Ark, Jaha had started devising plans to bring the whole thing to the ground. He ’ d been less upset about the fact that the Hatch had launched and more so that Wells had been on it – that his son had kept vital intel about the ground from him, regardless of where that intel had come from...

From that point on, Jaha and the rest of the Council had focused on prepping the Ark systems for landing, maintaining the stricter rule of order on the rest of its residents despite stopping the cullings. Kane described how Jaha had presented the Arkers returning to Earth as the human race ’ s second chance, the opportunity to take back what was rightfully theirs from birth, and how the Arkers had remained skeptical of the mission, nonetheless.

It was when Kane spoke of how the Ark had actually descended into Earth, though – how a man named Sinclair had discovered that the launching mechanism was broken and needed to be activated manually from within the holding ring – that Wells had truly been shaken to his core.

Upon this discovery, Jaha had then attempted to proposition various Council members to take the job of launcher, describing the role as that of a hero ’ s, the one who would allow humanity to continue on. They ’ d apparently seen right through him, though, refusing to entertain such an idea and forcing him to resort to more extreme measures.

He ’ d then essentially created a misinformation campaign amongst the lesser-skilled engineers who didn ’ t have access to Sinclair ’ s highly-classified information. Essentially, Jaha had informed them that two of them would be staying back to manually launch the Ark from the ring when the time came – the catch: he ’ d led them to believe that there would be a countdown window during which they ’ d be able to make it back to the main part of the Ark, that they would be going down to Earth with everyone else …

That plan – like all of Jaha ’ s – hadn ’ t gone accordingly, though, and the engineers both on board the Ark and the ones sentenced to the holding ring discovered Jaha ’ s trick at the last moment. Apparently, this had caused an uprising on the brink of launch that ’ d forced an Ark Guardsman to hold a family member of one of the launchers at gun point in order to force him to sacrifice his life regardless.

If that wasn ’ t bad enough, the Ark, itself, had evidently fared quite poorly on the initial descent into Earth ’ s atmosphere, and every station but that of Mecha was destroyed in fire and flames.

Upon landing, the Ark ’ s population had been bottoming out below a thousand, and the majority
were either exceptionally malnourished or becoming violently resentful of Jaha’s leadership choices as of late – which had ultimately led to the Council having to forcefully detain and replace him until further notice.

As it stood, Abby Griffin was the acting Chancellor and, if Kane’s estimation was correct, the remaining survivors of the Ark were in upcoming if not immediate danger of perishing due to extreme food shortages – none of which was being remedied with hunting due to the fact that no one from space actually knew how to.

When Kane finally finished his account, Wells could do nothing more than gawk at the man, looking to the Commander beside him who had her lips pressed into a hard line with something fierce burning in the depths of her eyes. Abby had her head in her hands now – the picture of utter exhaustion – with Kane resting his hand on the woman’s shoulder as if the gesture, alone, might lessen her burden somehow...

Wells, on the other hand … Well, he simply didn’t know what to say.

His father had lost it, that much was clear, and he couldn’t bear to even think of the man too much right now as he stared into the faces of those bearing the brunt of leading a dying civilization with a ticking time bomb at their backs. What was worse, Wells still had more bad news to deliver –

It was like a punch to his gut every time, like the fatal blow that refused to kill him, and he swayed slightly on his feet as the adults looked to him for something, anything, that might provide them a light at the end of their collapsing tunnel. He didn’t think he could do it, didn’t know if the words would actually come out of his mouth when he needed them to. As it was, Wells still hadn’t actually processed anything properly, himself, and he –

“So, what is this?” Abby spoke up finally, mercifully silencing Wells’s train of thought as she looked from him to the Commander, pausing to stare at the girl once more as she struggled to comprehend what she was seeing – who she was seeing. “The last I heard, Bellamy had spoken to Clarke about some Commander promising you kids refuge – ,”

“Which she remained true to,” Wells finished for her, chest inflating a bit as he felt the conversation being guided to something a bit more…manageable, “and has continued to make good on since the moment we landed here… Abby, Marcus – I’d like to introduce to you the Commander of the Twelve Clans, the reason that we’re all still standing here today.”

The Commander glanced at Wells briefly upon his introduction, something like gratitude flashing across her eyes for the briefest of moments before dulling to opacity once more.

“Twelve clans?!” Kane asked, astonishment blowing his eyes wide as a smile danced across his features, genuine delight settling there. “There must be hundreds of people here then – ,”

“Thousands,” the Commander interjected, her tone carefully implacable and purely factual as both Kane’s and Abby’s jaws fell open. “Each clan maintains their own customs and traditions, but it is the Coalition that keeps us all together now, helps us maintain relative peace. Especially after – ,”

She seemed to choke on her words all of a sudden, a lump coming to her throat as Wells knew exactly where she was going with that.

Especially after Clarke...

The two adults simply gawked at them, oblivious to the emotional display, eyes darting between Wells and the Commander as if that might physically force them to process what they were hearing.
After a few more moments of silence spent with neither Abby nor Kane seeming to comprehend, the Commander glanced at Wells and nodded once, signaling for him to proceed with their side of the story.

He was surprised by how much genuine pride swelled within his chest as he recalled how he’d come to consider himself a part of Trikru. The process of getting to the ground, reuniting with Clarke, meeting the Commander and her advisors, learning the ins-and-outs of the capitol – it was all remembered through a rosy film, some sort of positive reminiscence that filled him with a surprising amount of happiness.

Abby and Kane watched it all with matching masks of shock and utter fascination, Kane appearing the joyous light to Abby’s cynical shadow. Upon hearing how Wells, Bellamy, Octavia, and Raven had sworn their allegiance to Trikru, though, the two adults shared a weighted glance, neither giving much away as they appeared to hear every word following that admission with a slightly different tone to it.

The moment Wells had fallen silent once more, he couldn’t help but notice how Abby was looking at him then – how she appeared to see right through him, pick up on every detail he’d carefully omitted. Her eyes were narrowed, looking between Wells and the Commander as though she could practically see their deceit.

The Commander, for her part, remained startlingly impassive throughout Wells’s recollection, her expression never losing its stone-like opacity regardless of how many times Wells had said Clarke’s name, no matter how sharply the sound of it scraped against the shell of her chest cavity – like a kind of torture she was gladly accepting, was all-but forcing on herself now.

“All of that was, well … ,” Abby spoke up finally, trailing off as her brows shot up and she shook her head a little, clearly unable to find adequate words to give voice to her thoughts.

Both she and Kane appeared to struggle with Wells’s tale immensely for different reasons, but Wells decided that he couldn’t linger on that little detail right now – not when Abby was looking at him like that…

“But you still haven’t answered my question.” Her tone changed slightly, an undercurrent of worry cutting through every word now. “Well, you haven’t answered a lot of my questions, but I… Where’s Clarke? Why didn’t she come with you? Is she…where is she?”

Wells knew it was coming again, he really did, but that didn’t mean it hurt him any less – took the breath from his lungs any less forcefully. He closed his eyes for a moment, swallowing back tears as he tilted his face up towards the ceiling, suddenly feeling that urge to bolt churning deep within his joints once more. He didn’t think he could do this –

“The Mountain,” the Commander responded after a pause, painstakingly devoid of emotion as Wells snapped his eyes open to gape at her, utterly stunned. She was staring at Abby now, her eyes glued to the woman’s face as if she refused to allow the impending blow to be lessened by inattention.

“The –,” Kane began, his brows furrowing as he glanced between the two of them and down at Abby who met his confusion in kind. After the briefest of moments, though, a lightbulb seemed to illuminate. “Mount Weather!”

The Commander nodded once, seemingly ignoring how the man had come to that conclusion as her jaw clenched only slightly. Wells, for his part, found himself suddenly overwhelmed with the urge to lessen the burden from her shoulders, make the weight of the world that much lighter if only for a
The words were falling from his mouth unbidden before he could even think about it.

Everything; from the revelation of how the survivors in the Mountain had been sustaining themselves for decades to the ongoing war with the Grounders – reapers, acid fog, random bombings, all of it. Wells watched as the two adults’ faces changed to equal parts horror and disbelief as he revealed the secrets of a place they’d apparently had a completely different conception of – a conception that Wells was no more aware of than Abby and Kane were of reality.

It was when he got to the kidnapping – that horribly fateful event – that the adults finally began to catch on to Wells’s ominous tone, the way his voice had begun quivering over nearly every word… Wells had barely gotten to the part where Clarke and the others were taken into the Mountain before Abby was standing, Kane’s hands coming to rest on her shoulders once more as the older woman began to shake her head, her lip quivering as she began to shake her head over and over again.

Wells could barely look at her then, the sight of her beginning to comprehend to the brink of shattering too much for him to bear on top of everything else, so he forced his eyes to remain on Kane’s face, watching as the man silently begged him not to continue, not to say those fateful words.

The Commander was as still as stone beside Wells now, one hand white-knuckling her sword handle while the other clenched into an equally-white fist, her face paling with every passing word from Wells’s mouth – the remaining brightness being sucked from a spark already underfoot, already suffocating…

“She was…injured – badly, apparently,” Wells choked out, the words forced from his mouth with the blade of a knife lodged in his throat, cutting him raw from the inside.

Tears were streaming down his face now, wetting the patterns already carved into his cheeks there. He didn’t know if he could get the words out now, not with the knife choking him so – not with Abby looking at him as though he was twisting a spike into her vital organs, her face contorting in warring flashes of anguish, refusal.

“She made sure the others got out, that she’d saved them all, all of them worth saving – all of us – and then she –,” he coughed out a sob this time, his face contorting as the tears came harder now, painfully.

Abby was barely standing.

“Clarke didn’t make it, I-I’m…so sorry.”

Time stopped for a moment then. None of them moved, feeling the weight of the words settling over each of them as the rest of existence refused to carry on, refused to ignore the grave mistake that’d been made somewhere along the line…

Then, without warning, it snapped back.

“No – no, no, no, it can’t – you’re lying, she can’t be – I won’t – no…,”

Abby cried out in despair, her hand coming up to clap over her mouth as her knees gave out on her, forcing Kane forward to wrap her in the only thing keeping her from literal collapse. She was sobbing, screaming into her hands as everything good crumbled around them all – life’s order flipped on its head and tarnished, poisoned.
For, this simply wasn’t how life was supposed to be. No matter how many civilizations had come and gone before them, no matter how many would come after them, they all knew one simple reality: parents were not supposed to outlive their children. It was the one thing, the one concrete truth that everyone held to be constant, and it was now sitting at their feet, broken and violated in every possible manner of doing so.

How does anyone come back from that?

Wells looked away from Abby then, unable to watch the woman lose herself with Kane floundering in lost helplessness, desolation capturing them all in its devastation. He turned to the Commander instead, something like a wrench to his gut occurring the moment he saw her – saw how her fist was pressed to her mouth, a single tear cutting through the kohl on her face as her posture appeared rigid, pained.

It was as unexpected as if someone had come up and physically knifed him from behind, and Wells found himself having to catch his breath as he could do nothing more than stare, watch as the Commander – the very strength of the Ground, itself, coursing through her veins – struggled to keep from falling apart before his eyes, caught in the wake of a mother’s grief as excruciating as open flame to naked skin.

After moments more of Wells watching her helplessly, obviously, the Commander finally met his gaze – and that’s when Wells saw it.

He saw everything he’d been feeling – anguish, heartache, agony, torment – melded together to form something else entirely, the very personification of oblivion he’d been on the brink of for weeks now within the eyes of one in whose soul such nothingness had taken hold. Wells saw it, he felt it – he heard it, Abby’s broken wailing still screaming in his ears – and he finally realized that the Commander had become it.

She had become death.

Without warning, the Commander was moving forward, Wells watching as the girl came to kneel before Abby, taking the woman’s hands in her own, providing yet another grounding point as Kane remained steadfast, tears streaming down his face. They sat like that for seconds, minutes, hours, infinite more, Wells watching from a distance as the Commander shared in the grief of a woman she barely knew, held the hands of one who could no longer even support the weight of her own head...

Beyond the agony of it all, there was something else – something so pure, so human, about the way they were all existing in this moment. Wells couldn’t put a finger on it, exactly, but it felt...raw. It was real, it was there, and he was there.

For the first time since Clarke had left him alone in this life, Wells was present again.

He could almost smile, because of course – of course Clarke had been the one to bring him back to that place, even in death...

“ I can’t even imagine …,” the Commander spoke suddenly, nearly startling Wells with the sound as he registered the paradox of the girl – how even strength could be broken. “I can’t even begin to put myself in your place, Abby Griffin, but I –”, “ She choked on her words, her throat audibly clicking as she adjusted her grip on Abby’s hands with uncharacteristic nervousness.

Abby was inconsolable, her cries clawing Wells every which way – inside and out – but somehow, some way, he could still tell that she was hearing the Commander, listening to her speak. If only for the fact that she was leaning further into the girl’s support, perfect strangers united...
“I knew…Clarke.” The Commander had to force the name out, the sound of it somewhat grating the Wells’s ears as Abby’s cries intensified with the mention of it. “I knew her, and I... well, I must confess to you now that I do not believe anything in this life could ever come close to honoring who she was...”

Wells was captivated, unsure of what he was witnessing now as the Commander appeared to be rendering herself startlingly vulnerable in front of two people who were neither foes nor allies, neither strangers nor friends.

Abby was looking at the Commander now, her face contorting at the youth there that reminded her so much of her daughter, but she was at least looking...

“However, I do believe that I might have found a way to scratch that surface – for Clarke.”
Wells’s brows furrowed in immediate confusion, Kane matching his expression with eyes darting between Wells and the Commander in helplessness. Abby, on the other hand –

Abby was quieter.

Her sobs became snifflies, her tears still freely flowing down a face that’d aged years in minutes. To put it simply, Abby Griffin was wrecked, broken to the very core of her being beyond repair, but she was – she was quieter.

Then, taking everyone in the room by complete and utter surprise, Abby spoke:

“ I ’m listening. ”

“Clarke?”

She couldn’t move.

It was like her feet were physically glued to the floor, her limbs a leaden weight on every part of her, and she couldn’t breathe.

Her mom was standing a couple of steps into the room now, her eyes blown wide with pure shock as they drifted from the worn boots on Clarke’s feet up the tight black pants adorning strong legs, the weapons belt on her hips, the cross-straps that protected her chest over multi-layered tunics, the sling – and, finally, coming to settle on Clarke’s face, the scars and markings atop sculpted features resembling an adult in the place where a child used to stand, long braided hair framing that aged face.

Abby was completely frozen, shock rendering her a statue as tears began to well in her eyes, countless emotions flashing across her features and leaving a tremor in her fingertips.

For the second time in far too short a period, Clarke found herself utterly unseen, beyond comprehension.

“Chancellor Griffin,” Lexa spoke up after a moment, mercifully reminding Clarke of her presence as
her tone came surprisingly soft, gently curious – giving nothing away. “I am surprised to see you in the capitol so soon after your last visit. Is everything alright?”

*Last visit? Chancellor?!*

Abby just stood there, staring at Clarke’s face with disbelieving eyes, apparently unable to speak as Raven looked from Lexa and Gustus to Clarke, brows furrowed as growing concern settled on her face. Before anyone could make a move – disrupt the dust settling in the room – Marcus Kane suddenly rounded the corner, breathing heavily and having to stop himself short from running into Abby’s frozen form.

“Abby? Wha –?” He stopped short too, eyes nearly popping out of his skull as his jaw dropped, momentarily stunned.

Clarke stepped back unconsciously, the action seeming to pull Lexa towards her as if on a string, the other girl coming to stand beside her, expression filled to the brim with concern.

Clarke was barely functioning now.

Right as Lexa opened her mouth to whisper some small words of comfort to Clarke, Kane was sidestepping Abby and Raven and striding up to Clarke, wrapping her in an unexpected embrace as Clarke simply stood there, unmoving.

“I can’t believe it – it’s really you, isn’t it?” Kane breathed near the shell of her ear, leaning back the next moment to place his hands atop her shoulders and really get a good look at her. Clarke simply stared back at him, expression utterly blank.

She barely knew this man – barely knew what was happening *at all* right now, really – but here he was, embracing her like she was some distant niece of his who’d run off for a while and returned embattled. The look on her face seemed to process in Kane’s mind after a moment, though, and the man stepped back immediately, his hands falling from her shoulders as the welcoming smile that’d formed across his lips fell to something like resignation.

He looked down at his feet for a moment, clearing his throat somewhat awkwardly before he looked back up at the Commander, inclining his head to her in respect.

“Apologies on dropping in so unannounced, Commander,” Kane spoke up, seemingly ignoring what’d just transpired as the air in the room seemed to grow muggy with tension, a moment weighted. “It’s just – a bad storm rolled through and ruined some of the supplies your caravan had been transporting from here. We were getting a bit desperate and Indra wasn’t back in TonDC when we passed through, so we…decided to just make the trip ourselves.”

Clarke was so beyond confused that she didn’t even know where to begin.

Raven was eyeing every possible exit in the room now, the window seeming to grow more and more appealing with every passing second as Clarke and Abby continued to stare at each other, neither truly *seeing.*

*What am I supposed to do? I don’t know what to –*

“I see. Shall we find some place to discuss replacement provisions and next month’s allotment, then?” Lexa proposed lightly, clearly attempting to create an out for everyone but the Griffin women now.

Clarke really wished she wouldn’t.
“That sounds delightful, yes,” Kane replied immediately, sounding far too keen to slip out of the room as quickly as possible as Raven was already halfway out the door, throwing an apologetic glance back in Clarke’s general direction before turning the corner and bounding down the hall.

Lexa moved to stand in front of Clarke then, her expression wholly transforming as all others besides Clarke were blocked from seeing it. If she could’ve, Clarke knew Lexa would’ve moved to brush the strands of hair from Clarke’s eyes, maybe even place a placating kiss to her lips and murmur soft reassurances that everything was alright, everything was going to be just fine…

As it were, though, Clarke was forced to simply read those unfulfilled desires in Lexa’s eyes, meeting green eyes alight with concern and fierce protectiveness where Clarke stood baffled, frozen. She saw Lexa’s unspoken question, saw the need for permission to leave Clarke alone with this woman who looked as though she might break, and Clarke was helpless to do anything but nod once in response, her mind moving at a glacial pace as she struggled to push the puzzle pieces together.

Lexa’s lips pursed in worry at Clarke’s half-cognizant reply, but it seemed a moot point now, both Gustus and Kane waiting at the door for the Commander to see them out – Abby Griffin a formidable blockade in between. Subtly, in such a way that her torso blocked the movement, Lexa reached out and brushed her knuckles against Clarke’s abdomen, a coaxing touch that had Clarke’s eyes closing instantly, a shaky sigh loosing from her lips.

“I won’t be far,” Lexa whispered on the next breath, her words a firm promise despite their quiet tone. Clarke opened her eyes at that, nodding again and making an effort to force the corners of her mouth up into the softest of smiles – one that seemed to deflate Lexa’s shoulders only slightly.

With one last weighted look thrown in Clarke’s direction, Lexa turned on her heels, nodding once to an unseeing Abby before moving to lead Gustus and Kane from the room, the doors clicking shut with far too much finality upon their exit.

And, just like that, Clarke and Abby were alone.

Before Clarke could even begin her next train of thought, though, Abby was walking up to her, each step the personification of hesitation as she stopped within arm’s reach of Clarke, reaching a trembling hand out to cup her daughter’s cheek with painstaking slowness… The way her eyes scanned Clarke’s face, lingering on what she knew to be part of her daughter and furrowing her brows at what was unfamiliar to her, it was as if she was silently asking, is this really you? How can this possibly be you?

Tears were running down her mom’s face in streams now, but Abby was neither hysterical nor unhinged – she was simply inquisitive, careful, hoping…

“Raven told me that you were –,” Abby choked on the whisper of words, an audible gulp taking the place of the rest of the sentence as she continued her gentle roving of Clarke’s face, that meticulous investigation. She traced one of the scars on Clarke’s cheekbone with the tip of her finger, sending a shiver down her daughter’s spine.

Clarke still couldn’t move – couldn’t breathe.

“Is it true, Clarke? That you’re – that you’re a queen now?” Tell me it isn’t true.

Clarke could only nod once, her expression still wholly opaque as her mom continued to scan her face, sucking in a breath at Clarke’s confirmation. They stood like that for infinite moments more, neither more than breathing as they readjusted to living in a world where the other existed – where they could be seen.
“Oh, what have they done to you, baby?”

That was all the warning Clarke had before she found herself wrapped in her mother’s arms, Abby finally letting go as she cried quietly into Clarke’s hair, hands knotting into the fabric of the Azgeda uniform on Clarke’s back.

Clarke just stood there, allowing herself to be hugged for the second time in far too short a period, the cogs in her mind clamoring to a standstill as she struggled to process the emotions warring in her gut now.

She killed him – she killed my dad. How could she possibly think that I wouldn’t find out, that I wouldn’t make her confess it to me somehow? That she could just stand here acting like everything was okay?!

She was just doing what she thought was right, wasn’t she? After all, she wasn’t the one who pressed the button that sent him out to space –

But how can I possibly forgive her for it, regardless? She’s the reason I ended up in solitude, too, now that I think about it. If she’d have just let dad come forward with what he knew, then maybe –

I wouldn’t be here. None of this would be a reality. Everything would’ve been different.

I might not have met Lexa…

“–arke? Clarke, are you listening to me? Sweetheart, what’s wrong –?”

“I know,” Clarke cut her off suddenly, speaking for the first time in what felt like a millennium through a throat as dry as sandpaper, words like salt. Abby leaned back slightly with her brows furrowing, the picture of perfect confusion.

“Clarke, what are you –?”

“I know about dad.”

Abby’s mouth fell open at that, her eyes widening in dread as she nearly flinched away from Clarke, putting a bit of distance between them now. They stood there like that for minutes more, Abby staring at her daughter as if she couldn’t believe what she’d just heard, refused to process it – regret personified.

Clarke, on the other hand, was almost to the point of feeling nothing at all, and she welcomed it with greedy fingertips.

“I don’t know what –,”

“Wells told me,” Clarke interrupted her again, her tone flat and unyielding as she refused to allow her mom to ramble anything from denial to apology, wanting to hear none of it. “He told me, and I…I wish I knew what to say to you right now, but I just…don’t.”

Abby’s mouth snapped shut at that, her lips trembling slightly as she reached for her daughter, longed to give words over to touch. Clarke flinched away from it, though, retreating until the backs of her legs made contact with her bedpost, startling her slightly.

Abby coughed a sob in the wake of Clarke’s rejection, a shaking hand coming up to cover her mouth as she watched Clarke sigh in defeat, move to sink down onto the edge of the bed. As if feeling the need to be free of anything that might constrict her more than her circumstance was doing now,
Clarke made quick work of removing her sling as her shoulder protested only slightly, haphazardly throwing it to the floor before she shook her head a little, cradling it in hands supported by elbows resting on knees.

She genuinely didn’t know how she was supposed to do this, how she was supposed to look her mom in the face knowing what she’d done – what Clarke had done…

After all, if Abby Griffin had speckles of phantom blood on her hands, were Clarke’s not drenched and *dripping* with the stuff?

Simply put, Clarke was a killer – a trained soldier who’d carried out countless orders that’d ended lives, entire lineages. In fact, one could even say that Clarke had slain *Clarke*, had been the perpetrator of a murder of self – a metaphorical, if not occasionally literal, suicide. She was no more the daughter Abby that knew than Abby was the mother that Clarke had so longed for more times than she could count… All that to say, Clarke was *really* and *truly* in no position to hold her mother to some lofty standard that she, herself, could no longer meet.

So, where did that leave them, then?

Much to Clarke’s conscious surprise, words began to spill from her mouth and into her hands before she could stop them – yet another wave she was helpless to stop…

“All things you and dad ever taught me – everything that’d led me to believe that I was doing the best I possibly could, that I was making the right choices…I think that’s all gone now.” Clarke’s words came muffled, only lifting her head after a moment to stare off into the space in front of her, her mother’s eyes boring into her profile as she fell into contemplation.

“I used to think things were so black and white, you know? That there was only right or wrong, and I was gonna do my goddamned best to make sure that I was doing right no matter what it took – because that’s what Griffins do, right?”

Abby was moving now, crossing in front of Clarke’s vision as she felt a dip in the mattress beside her, her mother’s eyes never leaving her face. Clarke was completely lost in her own thoughts now…

“And I don’t…Well, I don’t exactly know where I lost track of what was right, but it must’ve happened at some point before now, because I –,” Clarke choked on the thought, squeezing her eyes shut against unbidden tears – those that’d seemingly refused to come until this point but were now all-but forcing themselves upon her.

Abby reached out slowly to place a hand on Clarke’s knee, drawing her daughter’s attention down to it as they both watched a tear fall and settle on the back of it.

“All things I possibly deserve that? How could she possibly look at me that way without knowing the things that I’ve done?”

“I don’t recognize myself, and it *scares* me – it scares me more than I can say, because I…I’m not…*good* anymore, mom… I’m *not good.*”
Clarke was pouring her soul out at this point, and Abby was letting her. Abby was letting her, because that’s what she’d always done – she’d always been there, right where Clarke needed her, and nothing that’d happened around her dad’s death would ever change that fact. Clarke could still blame her, could refuse to forgive her mother all she wanted, but that still wouldn’t make her feel any better. It wouldn’t bring him back or take away all the things she’d done, either…

It was funny how grief had a way of making people realize such things.

“I guess what I’m…what I’m trying to say here is,” Clarke sniffled, placing a hand over her mother’s still resting on her knee, her eyes fluttering slightly as Abby began to card her fingers through unbraided strands of blonde, “I don’t know if I can forgive you just yet, and I can’t promise that I won’t resent you for what you did, but I… I don’t know if I’m even in a position to give forgiveness in the first place –,”

“Clarke, baby,” her mother interrupted Clarke’s rambling with utmost tenderness, stopping her ministrations and adjusting so that she could better grasp onto both sides of Clarke’s face, force her daughter to look her in the eyes. “I can’t even begin to imagine what you’ve been through down here –,” She swallowed against raw emotion, her words loaded as Clarke fought the urge to whimper like a small child.

“I can’t, and I know that,” Abby continued, her thumbs stroking along Clarke’s cheekbones and catching tears with every movement. “But, what I can say is – maybe… well, maybe there are no good guys.”

It wasn’t an apology, nor was it an explanation, but it was enough – enough for this moment, at least.

With that, Clarke allowed herself to be pulled into her mother’s arms, let herself be held while they both cried quietly into each other’s embrace, sinking into the touch as though it just might be enough to save them both from themselves.

They didn’t know each other anymore – might as well have been perfect strangers for all the unanswered questions that still lingered in the air – but maybe, just maybe, this could be their new start…

“Thirteenth clan?! But how –?!?”

Abby was already rolling her long sleeve back before Clarke could even finish the question. She gestured to her exposed forearm, drawing Clarke’s attention and causing her daughter’s eyes to blow wide as she took in the distinguished mark of a clan’s chosen ambassador or leader. Clarke’s eyes darted from her mother’s to the mark several times before her mom chuckled a little, pulling her sleeve back down as she spoke.

“The Commander came to us about four months ago with Wells and they explained everything – the history of the ground, the structure of the clans and how they operated, everything… Marcus and I had already propositioned the Council to agree to let us take Jaha into custody at that point – which is where he currently remains, I might add –, and we were still trying to get our bearings on everything after losing two-thirds of the Ark’s main structure… And then they –,” Abby gulped, emotion
overwhelming her as Clarke squeezed her hand, her mother looking away for a moment to gather herself. When she looked back at Clarke after a moment, her eyes were glossy with raw pain.

“They told me that you…that you were gone, that you’d sacrificed yourself for everyone so that you could bring down Mt. Weather.” Clarke closed her eyes, feeling the reminder of the memory on the tip of her tongue and hating its bitterness. “We had no idea – every piece of intel we’d ever saved from the Ark’s initial protocol had indicated that we’d be able to seek shelter at Mt. Weather, be embraced into an environment that we knew… We were clearly wrong about that – that, and so much more, apparently…”

Her mom moved to trace one of the scars on Clarke’s cheekbone again, a tight set to her lips as she seemed to lose herself to contemplation. Clarke watched her quietly, waiting for what she’d known was bound to come since her mom had entered the room.

“Are you alright?” her mom asked after a while, causing Clarke’s brows to furrow in confusion as she processed her surprise over the question. It certainly wasn’t what she’d expected. “I just mean, is all this something you can handle? This –,” she gestured to Clarke’s face, her clothing, the insignia of Azgeda’s leader seeming to burn through Clarke’s chest now.

She looked away from her mom then, struggling not to get defensive at the question and wholly focusing on the amount of genuine curiosity and concern present in her mom’s voice instead. She clasped her hands together between her legs, elbows still resting on her knees as she sighed heavily, that ancient exhaustion sinking deeper into her bones now.

“I…I’m not completely sure, if I’m being honest,” Clarke answered finally, her tone quiet and thoughtful, puzzling at the questions that’d plagued her for quite some time now. “I care for my people – I really, truly do – and I don’t regret taking on the role, I just… I guess I just wish it was easier to see me in all this, you know? To see where I fit into a world without the threat of the Mountain – not where the queen of Azgeda fits.”

Abby nodded in Clarke’s periphery, clearly mulling the words over as she appeared to be choosing her next words carefully.

“Like I said before – I can’t even begin to put myself in your shoes right now, sweetheart, but what I can say is… I think – well, I’ve come to believe, I suppose – that life is a game of balance. Sometimes, we go through phases where everything is all well and good, and we can maintain perfect balance – or as close to perfect as life offers, I guess. And then, sometimes, that balance tips off – something comes along and throws us into chaos, and it’s a matter of the amount of resilience we’ve got inside of us to determine whether or not we get back on track…”

Clarke was looking at her mom now, eyes drifting over a face that seemed so much older and frail than the last time she’d seen it, a face that held every shade in the rainbow of emotion Clarke had ever felt – unbidden or otherwise. Her mom met her gaze, the ghost of a smile stretching across her lips as she squeezed Clarke’s hand between two of her own, eyes glinting with that pure affection that Clarke had such a hard time accepting as of late.

“I guess what I’m trying to say here is, you’ll find your balance someday, Clarke – even if it seems like that day might never come, you will stand on your own two feet again… It’s simply a matter of time.” Clarke nodded at that, leaning into her mother’s shoulder as Abby embraced her again, kissing the top of her head like she used to do every night before tucking Clarke into bed.

In that moment, it was almost easy for Clarke to imagine that she was a little girl back on the Ark again, the entire world quite literally at her feet as she relished in the comfort of a mother who’d loved her through it all.
“There’s still just so much I don’t know about you now, sweetheart,” Abby began again after a while, squeezing Clarke a little tighter in her arms as Clarke sighed a bit, something close to dread surging in her veins for a moment as she thought of how that conversation would go.

Abby was right – they’d barely even scratched the surface of all that’d happened since they’d last seen each other, but there was so much to unpack there that Clarke scarcely knew where to begin…

If only she could just take a moment, clear her mind of all this and focus on something else –

A soft knock at the door startled both women slightly, Clarke sitting up straighter on the bed as her mom maintained her hold on Clarke’s hands. The next moment, Lexa was striding in with a stoic expression on her face, the briefest flash of something like relief lighting her eyes at Abby and Clarke’s proximity on the bed.

Abby stood somewhat reluctantly to greet the Commander, inclining her head in respect as she still refused to let go of Clarke’s hand.

“Pardon the interruption, Chancellor, Queen Clarke, but Indra requests the presence of the Chancellor in discussing next month’s provision allotment from TonDC, and Marcus Kane does not feel comfortable dolling out commands without her permission.” Lexa’s tone was incredibly formal, giving nothing away but the message she’d come to deliver as Abby sighed beneath her breath, looking down at Clarke with something like regret.

“Of course, Commander – could I just have another moment with my daughter, please?” Lexa nodded curtly, turning from the room without so much as a glance in Clarke’s direction as Abby turned to Clarke, reaching for her daughter’s other hand.

Clarke allowed it, watching as her mother took both of Clarke’s hands in her own and looked down at her daughter with as much of a motherly scold as she’d worn on her face in quite some time.

“Don’t you even think about going anywhere or leaving this city without coming to find me first – got it?” Clarke smiled at that, nodding her head and chuckling a bit as her mom’s scold fell to a lighter smile in kind. She leaned down to kiss Clarke’s forehead, embracing her daughter once more as Clarke hugged her waist, relishing in the warmth there.

“I love you more than you’ll ever know, baby,” Abby spoke into Clarke’s hair, causing a lump to form in Clarke’s throat as she could only squeeze her mom tighter. “I’m so glad to have you back.”

Clarke simply nodded for a moment, sniffling against emotion as her mom squeezed her hands once more before turning and making to exit the room, throwing one last contented glance over her shoulder before disappearing around the corner.

In the next moment, Lexa was making her way into the room again, closing the doors soundly behind her as she strode over to Clarke. Without a word, Lexa got onto her knees before Clarke and took the girl’s hands in hers much like Abby had, looking up at Clarke with concern and something else burning deeply within her gaze.

Clarke could only stare down at her then, eyes roaming across the face of the one person who always made her feel like she was in the right place – like she was in balance.

“Is everything alright, ai hodnes?” Lexa asked after a moment, brows furrowing slightly as Clarke remained quiet, her hands squeezing Clarke’s between hers.
Clarke leaned closer to her then, adjusting so that their faces were barely more than a breath apart.

“You made Skaikru the thirteenth clan, Lex?” she asked softly, genuine disbelief coloring her tone as she stared at Lexa in something like awe-filled bewilderment.

Lexa looked down at the ground at that, surprisingly bashful for a moment while she gathered her thoughts, her thumb stroking the back of Clarke’s hand almost as if on instinct. She met Clarke’s eyes again after a pause, expression brimming with that same burning emotion Clarke had seen before, recognizable now as intense longing, overwhelming love – like she’d swallowed the sun whole.

Clarke blushed slightly at the fierceness of it, feeling herself being pulled into that place where it was just the two of them again, existing in a world outside of time and space – beyond the reach of anyone else, anything else…

“After Costia was murdered,” Lexa began softly, slowly, surprising Clarke a little with the direction of the words, the sheer weight of them, “I thought the grief would end me – that I would never live another day when I didn’t feel it with me, eating at me… But I also knew that I couldn’t let it. I couldn’t let my personal feelings stand in the way of what I knew I had to do – what I had wanted for all of the clans since I was young enough to understand what alliances meant, really… That is why I used her death to fuel my bringing Azgeda into the Coalition, not deter it – much to the opposite end of what Nia had intended, I’m sure.”

Clarke removed one of her hands from Lexa’s grasp to tuck a stray strand of hair behind the girl’s ear, moving to run her fingertips along the girl’s cheekbone and down her jawline with utmost tenderness, causing Lexa to shiver with pure contentment.

“When I thought that you’d –,” Lexa choked on the words, overwhelmed with the not-so-distant memory of grief that still occasionally showed itself in Lexa’s movements when she thought Clarke wasn’t paying attention. Clarke cupped the girl’s face, thumb never ceasing its gentle ministrations as she waited for Lexa to continue, to find herself again.

“It was…a completely different feeling entirely. I did feel it with me – at every turn, with every breath, you were there, haunting my every move and reminding me of what I had lost… It really did feel as though I had lost myself in the fires of the Mountain right along with you, and I-I couldn’t –,” Lexa shook her head, clearing her mind of the anguish that was making her throat grow tighter now, her voice shakier. Clarke remained steadfast before her, patient and tender, as much warmth in her expression as she could muster now.

Lexa squeezed Clarke’s hand in kind, looking at her in that way that Clarke had always adored – like Clarke was the moon that hung the stars, and Lexa but a grateful recipient of its light, its beauty.

“I didn’t know how to make it right – nothing seemed to lessen it, make it go away… That was when I received news that your home had returned itself to the Ground.” Lexa’s expression was taking on something else entirely now, a sense of pride and determination that Clarke recognized immediately – that brilliant strength that Clarke had found so enchanting when she’d first lain eyes on the Commander.

“I knew then – I knew what I had to do… If I couldn’t have you by my side to build something we could share in together, I would, at the very least, attempt to honor the legacy you had left behind – a legacy that spoke of peace, unity, something of longevity in a world that still seems to reap the souls of the ones we love far too soon to be just.” Clarke swallowed against the emotion Lexa’s words were stirring in her, awestruck that this wondrous creature before her was the one she was so privileged to love – the one whose face she got to touch whenever she so desired, just as she was doing now.
“I would welcome your people into mine before any impression could be made that might discourage them, and I would create an alliance with those who resembled more of the Mountain than any clan ever could – bring us face-to-face with what truly scared us most... It was the only way that I could ensure a future in which we all flourished – a future in which future generations might see beyond bloodshed, past division and look to something greater.” Lexa swallowed, one of her hands coming up to caress Clarke’s face, holding it just as Clarke was holding hers still.

When Lexa spoke again after a while, it was in a much softer tone – almost like an admission.

“It was the only way that I could bring you back to me somehow.”

Clarke closed her eyes, closing the distance between them to capture Lexa’s lips in a tender kiss, all slowness and feeling, savoring and longing. Lexa returned it with enthusiasm, both her hands coming up to tangle in Clarke’s hair as she straightened just a little, pushing Clarke’s head back with the fervency of the movement. Clarke moved to wrap her arms around Lexa’s neck beneath her hair, pulling the girl as close as she could physically get while their lips continued to speak of far too long-repressed desires, desperate longing.

When the need to take a breath broke their rhythm, Clarke took the opportunity to press her forehead to Lexa’s, both girls breathing heavily as they relished in the feeling of being in each other’s arms, invading each other’s personal space.

“You know how much I love you, right?” Clarke whispered after a moment, causing a blissful smile to spread across Lexa’s kiss-swollen lips, humming in pure ecstasy in response.

The next moment, Clarke found herself pushed back onto the bed, Lexa supporting her weight with her arms on either side of Clarke’s head – still exceptionally careful of Clarke’s wounded shoulder –, her fingertips playing at the edges of blonde hair. Clarke loosed an uncharacteristic giggle at the dramatically skeptical expression on Lexa’s face hovering above hers now, one eyebrow raised as the girl’s lips pursed.

“Hmm,” Lexa hummed again, its tone inquisitive as she seemed to be contemplating the question rather seriously. “Perhaps I do, yes, but it couldn’t be anything close to how I feel for you now, could it?”

Clarke gasped in feigned offense then, half-heartedly pushing at Lexa’s shoulders as if to get the girl off of her as Lexa began peppering Clarke’s face with kisses, causing another fit of laughter to burst from somewhere deep in Clarke’s chest.

“How rude of you to assume such a th–,” Clarke’s words were lost in Lexa’s mouth as the girl captured her lips in a searing kiss once more, hands tangling in hair and bodies pressing against one another, touching at every possible point.

They kissed like this for infinite moments afterwards – full-bodied, passionate, all-encompassing – and Clarke found herself getting lost in the euphoria of it all, getting lost in Lexa…

When at last it seemed as if they might stray too far from Commander and Queen with such an audience waiting metaphorical footsteps outside of the door, they acquiesced to responsibility, Lexa resting her forehead on Clarke’s as they re-discovered what it was like to have the proper amount of air in their lungs. Clarke hugged Lexa to her, refusing to let go as the other girl nuzzled into her, truly content for the first time in a while.

“How did it go with your mother?” Lexa asked softly after a pause, her tone breathless and careful as she poured as much genuine curiosity into the words as possible.
Clarke sighed, knowing she would have to recap it all soon enough but once again being swept up in the need to put her mind elsewhere, let it rest for moments she didn’t seem to have these days…

“It went…better than I expected, actually,” Clarke answered honestly, something like surprise seeping into her voice as Lexa placed another kiss to her cheek, adjusting her weight again to account for Clarke's shoulder still out of its confinement. “I just…”

Clarke trailed off with a sigh, the sound of which drew Lexa’s head up, the girl looking down at Clarke with a slight tilt to her head, unspoken questions in her eyes.

“I guess I just… Is it so bad that I want to think of something else for a moment? Take myself away from all that and just… I dunno – get distracted somehow, I guess?”

Lexa nodded a little, immediately understanding as she ran her thumb across Clarke’s bottom lip and caressed her cheek once more.

“It is completely understandable after the past few days you have had, ai hodnes,” Lexa agreed softly, her fingers carding through Clarke’s hair now as she met the girl’s gaze with unhidden affection. “Shall we take a walk? Maybe go to the library, or visit the Natblidas, even?”

Clarke hummed, considering her options for a moment before something struck her.

Missing kids.

Those two words turned over and over in her head as Lexa’s gaze turned from gently inquisitive to slightly concerned as she noted the change in Clarke’s expression. She’d been completely diverted from inquiring further into it upon her mom’s appearance, but now the thought seemed to equate itself to distraction as Clarke looked up at Lexa with growing unease.

“Hodnes? Is everything –?”

“What was Gustus talking about earlier?” Clarke interrupted her, a slight urgency to her tone as she felt the need to gather information she didn’t currently have. “What did he mean about those missing kids?”

Lexa paused for a moment, staring down at Clarke with a brief crease forming between her brow before she sighed heavily, mourning a moment departed before removing her weight from Clarke and extending a hand to the girl still sprawled on the bed. She knew Clarke too well to argue with the girl’s occasionally sporadic train of thought at this point…

Clarke accepted the offer with her good hand, straightening herself up and re-adjusting her crumpled clothes as Lexa spoke.

“It started two months ago with a report from the Plain Riders of a stolen infant – a baby boy, mere months old. Since then, twelve more reports of children disappearing have been delivered from multiple clans, all children under the age of five.”

Lexa gestured for Clarke to follow her as she strode from the room and down the hall. The two of them passed sentries and various Tower hands as they made their way to an unimposing door at the far end of the hall, Lexa turning to open the door and revealing a small room filled with maps folded and overflowing from wooden cubby-holes on three of the four walls in the room.

Lexa and Clarke stepped inside, Clarke closing the door behind them as she made her way over to where Lexa stood looking down at a large roundtable on which a huge and detailed map was stretched out. Depicted in the colorful lines and plains of the map was, apparently, the entirety of Lexa’s kingdom, so to speak.
Stepping up beside Lexa and closer to the map, Clarke raised her brows at the thirteen little red markers now discernible on the map, their arrangement forming a near-perfect horizontal “U” shape. Clarke looked beside her at Lexa, utterly baffled.

“These are the locations of where the children were last reported as having been seen – in their homes, for the most part,” Lexa explained, a hard set to her lips as she rested her chin on her closed fist, expression screaming of displeasure and barely-contained anger. “As you can see, there’s clearly a pattern here…”

Clarke bent down closer to the map, placing her finger right below the marker on the far bottom edge of the Plain Riders territory that marked the outer dip of the “U,” and tracing it to the next two locations in their territory that seemed to appear in perfect sequence. The rest of the pattern stretched into Delphi and Glowing Forest, presenting somewhat of an ominous picture for the Lake People and Rock Line.

“Any suspects?” Clarke asked after a moment, her eyes still trained on the map before her, utterly stumped. Lexa shook her head in Clarke’s periphery, expression grim.

“No. I have sent scouts to all of the locations, and each has returned to me with equally unassuming stories of the families whose children were stolen – no enemies to speak of, any of them.”

Clarke furrowed her brows, shaking her head a little as she shared in Lexa’s solemnity and bafflement.

“And what of the other clans? What do they have to say for themselves?”

“I have had inside men searching the Coalition boundaries for weeks – apart from Azgeda territory, of course – and no trail has been found... It is as if they just…disappeared into thin air.”

Upon hearing the sheer amount of disturbance in Lexa’s voice, Clarke reached her hand out and intertwined her fingers with Lexa’s, sharing a weighted look with the other girl before they both looked back down at the map.

“I was going to send Roan back to Azgeda in my stead within the next couple of days anyways – I’ll have him conduct a search.” Lexa nodded at this in Clarke’s periphery, her gaze lingering as other words remained unspoken.

In my stead...

Clarke’s mouth formed a thin line, shaking her head once more as she continued to puzzle.

“Whoever’s doing this…it’s like they know exactly where to go, who to kidnap… Does anyone else have maps like these outside of the Tower?” Clarke asked, gesturing broadly across the room as Lexa shook her head immediately, firm.

“No – not to this extent and detail, anyway.” Clarke nodded slowly, trying to process this new information with the thoughts already swirling around in her brain.

If that was true, then the only other possible entity with that much access to information would be the Ark. It would be the only place that anyone might be able to pull up that kind of detailed information – the only place that would allow for such an elaborate scheme to be planned for –

Wait a minute, that’s not true...

The Mountain.
No, it can’t be – I destroyed it, it’s gone, there’s nothing left of that technology –

You didn’t destroy it all, you idiot. You didn’t destroy all of them.

And then it hit her – the gross oversight she’d been committing since the moment she’d arrived back in Polis…

How could I be so blind?! How could I not have looked for them, realized they were missing – that no one was talking about them?!

Clarke turned her entire body to Lexa then, causing the other girl’s brows to furrow in alarm at the sudden amount of dread present in Clarke’s expression now.

“Lexa, when was the last time you saw Maya and Thomas?”

Chapter End Notes

I'm like...v excited about this plot line I'm about to start unfolding. Probably much more so than anyone else lmao, but like - !!!!!

Just a lil aside - my characterizations of Abby and Kane are definitely certain characteristics I notice most about them in the show but like ampLIFIED. Hopefully it makes sense with where I'm going with Skaikru and all of them...

ALSO - I finally got a tumblr if anybody would like to come yell into the void w me or @ me lmao: spicydiceyboi

Thank you again to everyone who comments and leaves love and/or constructive feedback on this story. It is endlessly appreciated, and I shall try to reply to questions on this one if you have any.

Much love to you all <3
Clarke came to a stop so suddenly that she nearly dislocated a kneecap.

With as much dignity as she could muster, she brushed the haphazardly-thrown dirt off of the front of her dark uniform, lungs heaving beneath her ribcage as she attempted to appear less winded than she felt.

 Barely a moment later, she was striding forward towards the lone wooden cabin positioned mere yards from the southernmost wall of the capitol.

She could hear shouted orders echoing through the relative quiet of the southern quarter, the Commander and a few of her guard thundering after Clarke in the attempts to catch up. After all, Clarke had stormed out of the Tower immediately upon receiving the rough details of Maya’s and
Thomas’s current dwellings from Nyko – the two not having been spotted in public for far too long for Clarke’s liking – and taken off at a sprint without even a parting word to Lexa. That being the case, the Commander had been forced to rally the warriors who’d automatically fallen into place at her flank – Anya being one of them – into a makeshift squadron.

Clarke caught the edge of her name being shouted from familiar lips as she made her final approach but chose to ignore it, instead electing to barrel through the crooked door situated on a rotting frame, the only resistance the force of still wind. She stepped over the threshold with her hand secured on the blade of her longsword, her strides slowing to a weary creep as she inched into the cabin apparently devoid of occupants at the moment.

Two small mattresses were pressed together and situated on the floor of the far-left corner of the single-room dwelling, blankets strewn every which way – almost as though someone had been jumping on them recently, a sign which gave her a semblance of hope. A spotless cooking area sat in the corner directly-parallel to the bedding, a single candle burning atop a short stack of concrete blocks apparently acting as the sole counter space in the room. Beyond those two areas of living, though, there was nothing else in the cabin, a space that was almost…cozy, if Clarke could even remember the meaning associated with that word.

Upon instinct – originating from where, she couldn’t identify – Clarke walked over to the makeshift kitchen and bent to blow out the candle, observing the small pool of melted wax beneath the flame that indicated it hadn’t been lit for long –

A gasp came from behind Clarke’s back, the startled sound followed by the clatter of multiple somethings falling to the ground. Clarke whirled instantly, drawing her sword in the same swift motion as the turn before she was utterly and completely frozen in place.

It was Maya. This ghost from her past – the girl with curly hair, frightened eyes, and an unhealthy pallor to her skin – was now standing in the doorway of the small shack with a pile of firewood at her feet, looking at Clarke as if she, herself, was coming face-to-face with the very apparition that haunted her so. Her hair looked fuller, tied back into a wild bun that left many curls to spring out on their own, her skin kissed with the unmistakable glow of sunshine, her eyes brighter – a vision of life in the place of a dying shell.

“Clarke?” The girl whispered after a moment, the name nothing more than a breath on her lips.

She took a step towards Clarke as if in a trance, the movement interrupted by the clatter of multiple somethings falling to the ground. Clarke whirled instantly, drawing her sword in the same swift motion as the turn before she was utterly and completely frozen in place.

Maya simply gaped at her, eyes wide and cheeks paling as she struggled to process the figure now holding her up.

“Clarke!!” came a voice from a few yards away, the shout coupled with the sound of metal sliding from multiple sheaths and clomping footsteps.

Clarke looked over Maya’s shoulder just in time to see Lexa striding quickly towards the two of them and signaling for her guard to remain back a few paces, flashes of alarm and relief warring on her features as her eyes darted up and down Clarke’s person – searching for any injuries or signs of impending harm. Upon seeing Clarke’s simultaneously apologetic and placating glance, Lexa seemed to loosen the grip on her sword handle just a little, her steps stuttering as she adjusted for approach rather than pounce.

“Commander? Wha –?” Maya’s soft voice spoke up in question, her eyes blown wide as she looked
between Clarke and the Commander, sudden panic flashi
brow raising as she saw through Clarke’s compliance immediately, refusing to bring any more attention to it.

Clarke didn’t miss the way Maya’s hands seemed to tremble as she poured enough water from a glass container into the boiling pot for two…

“So…,” Maya spoke up again, her voice forcefully light as she continued to prepare the tea, “what brings you two over to this neck of the woods? I haven’t seen you since your welcome ceremony, Clarke, and I –,”

“You were there?” Clarke cut in, her question soaked through with genuine curiosity. Maya nodded, her movements stopping as she threw a weighted glance over her shoulder at Clarke.

“In the shadows, yes. Thomas and I…well, w-we didn’t think we could miss it after…everything. Everything you’ve done for us – all of us…” Maya swallowed audibly, turning more fully towards Clarke and the Commander as Lexa took the smallest step closer to Clarke, her hand drifting to the small of Clarke’s back – comforting, grounding.

Clarke nodded to herself, looking down to the floor as she struggled with the lump that was quickly forming in her throat, shoving her reaction to the very base of her spine where she felt Lexa’s warmth – as if that might allow her to move on completely.

“That’s…thank you, I –,” Clarke swallowed, still struggling with brutal force against the obstacle blocking her windpipe. She felt a pressing need to continue on, to change the subject to something less tangibly suffocating…

“We…,” Clarke trailed off, suddenly struggling to find the right words that would explain the frantic train of thought that brought her here. “There are kids, missing kids – none of yours, but over a dozen from various clans.”

Better to just be out with it, then, right?

Maya’s mouth fell open, her eyes darting between Clarke and Lexa as if waiting for the other shoe to drop, hoping for the gig to be up. She took an unconscious step back, her face paling as she struggled to comprehend.

“And y-you think that I –?”

“We do not know what to think,” Lexa cut in finally, her tone exceptionally level, fair. “But, the kidnappings have taken place in an odd fashion – in a pattern for which Clarke believes could have only been achieved –,”

“Using technology similar to that of what I saw in the Mountain,” Clarke finished for her, stepping a little towards Maya with something like a pleading expression on her face – asking for compliance, really.

Maya’s brows furrowed as comprehension finally seemed to dawn on her features, the girl looking away and off into the distance as if deep in the throes of contemplation now. Clarke and Lexa shared a look, Lexa’s hand pressing further into the small of Clarke’s back as they waited.

Then, after moments of waiting long-spent in tension, Maya spoke:

“I’d like to see for myself.”

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“This…is impossible,” Maya uttered for what had to be the twentieth time since they’d arrived in the map room. “The accuracy, the obvious targeting of certain areas more so than others… I see what you thought you saw, Clarke.”

Clarke furrowed her brows in confusion, feeling Lexa’s eyes on her as Maya rubbed at her chin, shaking her head.

“What do you –?”

“You were right,” Maya cut her off, walking quickly to the side of the map table directly opposite Clarke and pointing at the furthermost point on display. “Systematic geographic targeting like this is only achievable with full, infrared mapping capabilities, which would include the ability to adjust your readings according to migrant populations and animal patterns prevalent in specific areas…”

Maya bent so that her face was level with the top of the map, shaking her head once more as Clarke fought the urge to stoop down, too.

“I only ever heard rumors from my father about Mt. Weather’s targeting capabilities, but I do know that the systems experienced an automatic software update every few months or so according to a code installed by a branch of the governing body of what used to be the United States. It was a highly classified and exceptionally specific program designed for the intelligence and reconnaissance needs of whatever remained of the human race – within the Mountain, at least… You’re certain that none of your people have access to similar technology, Commander?”

“Absolutely,” Lexa answered immediately, her tone unwavering as Maya continued to stare at the map. “Polis is and always has been the central hub of information for all twelve clans, and – if what you are saying is correct – nothing we possess comes even close to the technology required to attempt such an undertaking, let alone carry it out successfully on multiple occasions… Of this I am certain.”

Maya was nodding before Lexa could even finish, receiving the confirmation she’d apparently already been counting on as she furrowed her brows even harder, her lips forming a hard line. Clarke could only just keep from tapping her foot impatiently against the stone floor.

“Is there no –,” Clarke spoke up, swallowing against that same lump that wouldn’t stop attempting to make itself known. “Is it possible that something from…the Mountain could’ve –?”

“No,” Maya cut her off immediately, the syllable clipped, sure. She glanced at Clarke with a flash of sorrow intermingling with sympathy in her gaze, her expression softening from intense contemplation to something else. “Thomas and I…we went back – just to see, just to be sure… There’s nothing. The Commander was there, too, she can tell you – nothing…”

Clarke’s head whipped around towards Lexa, shock dawning on her features as the other girl’s expression once again fell, darkening while simultaneously pleading for a moment alone with Clarke, if only to explain herself… Clarke simply swallowed harder, turning back to face Maya and pointedly ignoring the silent pleas prickling in the space between herself and Lexa, unable to bear them right now on top of everything else.

“That leaves…well, where exactly does that leave us, then?” Clarke asked after a few tense moments spent in weighted silence, feeling both Maya’s and Lexa’s eyes glued to her rigid frame. “The parents and guardians of the missing kids are totally random – unconnected – and one kidnapping differs so entirely from the next that it almost seems like it’s a bunch of random occurrences that just so happen to create a perfect pattern… That’s far too coincidental for my liking, though.”

Clarke was just thinking out loud at this point, and she continued to ramble off scenarios into the stuffy air of the enclosed room until she felt blue in the face. Each time she did, though, either Maya
or Lexa would come up with a plausible reason as to why that particular scenario couldn’t possibly reveal a culprit to them, and Clarke was beginning to feel as though she was digging herself an inescapable hole in which she’d be buried.

At the end of the day, it very well could be that all of the kidnappings were just happenstance, but Clarke had seen far too much of human cruelty in her short lifetime thus far to truly believe that to be the case – to believe in anything less than mass coordination by some evil force. If that was true, though, then it didn’t leave her with many options now, did it?

Say the kidnapper did possess a paper map of all the clan territories; that map would still have to contain details of all individual settlements and boundaries within their targeted areas – the likes of which would require a great deal of reconnaissance and measurement. The kind of time and manpower necessary to attempt such a feat would surely draw suspicion, wouldn’t it? And Lexa had said that none of the reports she’d received included any mention of suspicious or coordinated behavior that might lead one to believe something like a kidnapping might soon take place…

So, it had to be someone with advanced technology, then, didn’t it? Someone with not only the advanced cartographic imaging tech Maya had mentioned, but also the ability to track individual movement down to even the smallest of children. Besides the Mountain, Clarke couldn’t think of any settlement that might possess such a thing… Although Skaikru did have the technological capacity to accomplish such a heinous feat, Lexa kept assuring Clarke that she’d had Anya and Indra search Arkadia on multiple occasions – with Abby and Kane’s assistance – and not a single thing was found to be out of place, personnel included.

So, where does that leave me?

I might start resorting to something like those stories of alien abduction that Wells used to scare me with if I can’t figure this out… Or, hell, even time travel might explain more of this than –

Wait a minute.

I’m missing something…

Suddenly, Clarke found her mind being called back to the vaguest of memories, the faintest of hints – something that couldn’t possibly fit with any of these details… Could it?

Straps choking the blood-flow from every one of her limbs, needles digging into the soft spots of skin far too thin…

Academic-aloofness mixing with the smugness on both of their faces – an elderly man with bright eyes, a severe woman with dark hair and firm lips…

Lexa will get me out of this, I know she will… I just have to let them do the talking. I can do this, I can do this –

“I would address you by your name, but I’m afraid I don’t know what it is…

...Dante Wallace, President of Mt. Weather under the guidance of the New Republic. And you are?”

“Clarke?” Lexa’s voice pulled Clarke back to the present, a hint of concern lighting its tone as Clarke met her gaze, eyes clearing of fog from a distant memory – as confusing and ill-placed then as it was now.

“Maya, what can you tell me about the New Republic?” Clarke asked in the next breath, refusing to waste a single moment and watching as Lexa’s brows furrowed with immediate worry and confusion
Maya shot up to a standing position, her eyes blowing wide as her mouth fell agape, looking utterly pale as she stared at Clarke.

“W-where did you hear that name?” Maya whispered, the words nothing more than a breath as her lips started to tremble slightly, her fear evident. Clarke’s confusion simply grew.

“When I was –,” Clarke swallowed, mentally choosing her words very carefully as she worked her jaw slightly. She saw Lexa watching her oh-so-closely now, couldn’t bear the thought of breaking her love’s heart any further…

“It was how Dante introduced himself – president ‘under the guidance of the New Republic,’…” Have you ever heard of it, Commander?”

Lexa simply shook her head, her eyes glued to Clarke as she searched the girl’s face – looking for the missing pieces of the puzzle Clarke was trying so hard to keep scrambled.

“It was…a children’s story, really,” Maya spoke up finally, her voice frail even in the relative safety of the enclosed space. Her face was incredibly pale, her gaze far-off once more. “Like a lullaby one would tell a child to calm them, I suppose – a fable we all grew up latching onto, hope for a brighter future above ground…”

Lexa’s jaw clenched in the side of Clarke’s vision, her posture growing more and more hostile by the second.

A future at whose cost?

“I seem to remember those lullabies having some pretty grim lyrics – if we’re thinking of the same ones, that is… What did it say?” Clarke asked, inching towards Maya almost unconsciously as the girl swallowed, that faraway look growing slightly reminiscent all of a sudden.

“A shining city on a hill. Castles made of diamonds built so high they touched the clouds… Everyone was beautiful there, no one wanted for anything – not food, not water, not air. Perfect health was not only attainable, but a reality for everyone – no inequality, no suffering.” Maya smiled the saddest of smiles, her eyes shining with the melancholy of a childhood dream long-shattered, burned in the harshness of reality’s radiation.

“You could see why one might latch onto such a thing as a kid growing up beneath a huge pile of rocks, couldn’t you? It was a promise of perfection, prosperity. It was…utopia.”

Clarke could see it in her mind’s eye like quartz beneath a crystalline lake – like the cities of Before, but…better, more real. Not facades of artificial invention covering a scene of stratification and misery parading as the promised land, but the actual promised land – a kingdom of fantasy, the stuff of dreams sought after by humankind for centuries.

They’d grown up with something similar on the Ark, but it’d centered much more around nature – the Earth, itself – as opposed to manmade illusions. Regardless, Clarke understood that faraway look on Maya’s face now, the way she seemed to cling to dreams and long for the surreal – after all, if there’s one thing that the various stints in solitary confinement had taught her, it was that the mind would latch onto even the most obvious of false promises if that meant an alleviation from near-constant mental torment at one’s own hand.

“If it’s – why would Dante introduce himself that way, then? Introduce himself as the president of whatever under the guidance of a fairytale?” Clarke looked to Lexa at this, the girl just as baffled as
she was and visibly shaking her head, taken aback.

Unless it’s not actually a fairytale…

No, that’s impossible. Something like that would’ve shown up in the Ark’s system or would’ve, at the very least, made an appearance in one of the protocol manuals for Earth-landing. No way something like that gets ignored…

“I can’t even begin to put myself in the shoes of a Wallace – and I don’t want to,” Maya practically spat, a grimace pinching at the corner of her mouth as she merely attempted to contemplate such a thing, “but my best guess is that it was somewhat of a status thing, clinging on to some lofty title for the sound of it… I mean, that entire fable was one giant tease – as in, ‘we’re going to tell our kids this story so they buy into the idea that one day we’ll be able to bring them this perfect slice of heaven on a platter.’ And, ‘maybe if we leave enough breadcrumbs and trinkets that resemble that which might be found in this so-called heaven, then they’ll keep doing what we want them to do until the day they die – if only in the hope of finding that heaven once their eyes close.’”

Maya walked further around the table and away from Clarke and Lexa, her hands on her hips as she turned her back to them, her head drooping dejectedly. Clarke glanced at Lexa, finding the girl’s eyes exceptionally far away, as well – stuck on an image cloaked in fog, as untouchable to her as the cold metal of technology she neither understood nor wanted any part of.

“Would Thomas maybe…does he know more about it –?”

“No, Clarke. It doesn’t work like that – nobody knows more about it than anyone else, ‘cause it’s just a story. That’s it – a kid’s story. Nothing more, nothing less.” Maya had whirled around then, her voice akin to the bitter crack of a whip as she appeared utterly done with this conversation.

Upon seeing the stung look on Clarke’s face – and the warning look on Lexa’s – Maya seemed to flinch back into herself once more, sighing deeply as exhaustion seemed to overwhelm her, caught in the tidal waves of changing emotion as she was.

“I’m sorry…I just –,” Maya sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose as she closed her eyes, “I don’t like remembering this stuff, it just… It brings up a lot, I guess.”

Clarke nodded immediately, understanding lighting her features as she felt a flash of empathy burn through her gut. If there’s one thing she understood completely, it was emotional outbursts…

“Look, if you want my advice, I say start at the site of the first kidnapping – start there, and follow the exact path you’ve drawn out on this map until you reach the spot of the second incident.” Maya’s voice was much softer now, the girl’s arm extended to allow her finger to trace along the sideways horseshoe that marked the kidnappings.

“Keep doing this until you’ve covered all your bases – or until you’ve found a clue that might lead you in a better direction. Even if scouts have already scoured the area, there’s no better detective than the one asking the most questions... That’s what I’d do if I had the resources you do, at least.”

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“You can’t be serious.”

“I am, Lex – very, actually,” Clarke insisted, watching as Lexa continued to pace a trail in her bedroom floor, her expression the very picture of conflict. “Maya was right – we can’t keep sending
other people to get the answers for questions that we’re asking. It’s not right.”

“That is not what she said,” Lexa retorted immediately, her jaw working back and forth as Clarke groaned at her stubbornness. “My scouts have swept the alleged radius of all kidnappings up and down nearly half-a-dozen times now, and nothing has been found. What reason would you – a queen, no less – have to believe that you could find something they couldn’t?”

“Did the scouts know about the pattern? Did they sweep the actual distance between each incident?!” Clarke responded heatedly, causing Lexa to stop in her tracks merely a couple feet from her, jaw clenched and eyes hard. “Look, Lex, I’m not saying that I’ll find anything more than anyone else already has, but I could at least try to find something using the information we have that no one else apparently does... Forget about fables and pipedreams – this could be my chance to prove to the other clan leaders that I’m serious about Azgeda’s newfound respect for the Coalition and all that it entails! Even by my just going out there and showing that I give a damn about those kids beyond a simple heartfelt apology, imagine what that could mean for us – for all of us... This could be my olive branch, Lex.”

Lexa’s eyes darted between both of Clarke’s, her expression speaking of more emotions than could be named, the cogs in her mind grinding against one another with the depth and breadth of all that’d been presented at her feet to consider. Of the various battles being wages beneath the surface of the girl’s eyes, though, Clarke could clearly see the growing poignancy of dread settling in the center of her pupils, a feeling that pulled at the very crux of her trauma that revolved around the simple words that’d ruined her life...

“She’s gone... She didn’t make it. I’m so sorry...

“What about your people?” Lexa spoke up finally, cutting through the moment that was threatening to prickle at the back of Clarke’s eyes with a voice that gave life to the opaque. “Who do you trust that will look after them if you are gone for such an extended period of time?”

Clarke flinched at the questions, both of them knowing that Lexa bringing it up would be enough to wound them both for days to come – the elephant in nearly every room they’d been in since the moment Clarke had walked back into Lexa’s life... They both knew it was coming, Clarke’s imminent departure from Polis that would mark the beginning of an extended period of time during which neither had any idea when next they would see the other. There was always next year’s festival, of course, but that, in and of itself, raised another set of questions entirely...

Would that be it, then? Would both of them be doomed to live a life on opposite ends of the same string, revolving around each other only to meet at a central point once in a blue moon until the day that one or both of them perished?

Was that really all the promise of more would ever hold for them?

“I was planning on sending Roan back in my stead, anyway,” Clarke responded finally, her voice quiet and only just firm enough to keep from trembling far too tellingly. “I can send him back with instructions for a longer term until further notice... I was thinking of asking Jax to take Isa and go back, too. He’d be useful in sorting out some agricultural issues we’ve been having, and I know he’d like to see his family again...”

At this, Lexa closed her eyes for a moment, her lips forming a grim line as grave pain flashed across her features. On the next breath, though, she was turning on her heels, striding towards her large window only to stop and place her hands on her hips, only her profile visible as she stared off across the seeming infinity of her reign.
Clarke knew how difficult this all had to be for her, but she struggled to see where either of them had much choice here. After all, both of their hands were tied by leadership positions that demanded of them everything but the physical hearts within their chest cavities – and sometimes even those were not protected by much... Clarke had to keep both her short-term and long-term diplomatic goals in mind at all times now – especially after the Challenge – and it made personal desires and feelings little more than a luxurious after-thought – an after-thought which Lexa was all-too-painfully familiar with at this point…

Finding those kids would be as much of a diplomatic victory as it was a heartwarming one, and Clarke knew that Lexa had to see the benefit of Clarke being the one to bring that victory home to the leaders of the Coalition, if nothing else. Even if she couldn’t actually find those kids, it would mean more to the parents and people of the clans that the Queen of Azgeda had even attempted such a feat than any Challenge conquered ever would, and it would take a hell of a lot of strain off Clarke’s back to have such a sentiment on her side on top of all her other titles.

*Wanheda, Mountain-Slayer, and Queen be damned… This means more to me than any of that.*

“Fine,” Lexa finally stated after a while, abruptly ending Clarke’s train of thought as she turned to face the girl once more, her expression surprisingly measured. “You may make whatever arrangements necessary to lead a search party along the path of the kidnappings, and I will make sure that my advisors are well-versed in the protocol that will fall into place upon my extended absence.”

At this, Clarke’s mouth fell open, a disbelieving but joyous smile spreading across her features as she processed Lexa’s words.

“Gustus will stay behind with Titus to see to it that the ambassadors make it safely home, as well as ensure that Polis remains in tight order while I’m gone. Indra will accompany your mother and Kane back to Arkadia and straighten out their shipment issues, after which point she will return to TonDC and oversee things from Trikru’s strongest trading village.” Lexa was standing in front of Clarke now, the girl having slowly made her way away from the window as she spoke her plans aloud.

She reached up to cup Clarke’s face in her hands, Clarke’s own coming up to secure them in their rightful spot.

“Any shall accompany me as my personal guard, and I… I will be where I should be – by your side, always.”

At that, Clarke leaned in to press the most tender of kisses to the girl’s lips, relishing in this moment of relative quiet that’d arrived to present them with an opportunity to stay together – to remain in each other’s radius for simultaneously selfish and purposeful reasons, if only for a short while longer.

*A moment found, so many others lost…*

“Even if our search amounts to nothing in the end, we will find a way to make the best of this, Clarke… That much I promise you.”

______________________________________________________________________________

“Absolutely not – no way in hell!!”
“Mom, please –,”
“No, Clarke – I said no!!” Abby shouted back at her, the only sound in the awkwardly silent throne room at this point that of her and Clarke quarreling. “If you think I’m going to just let you go on some wild goose chase for months on end with barely more than a word from you after everything –,”
“I’m NOT asking your permission!!” Clarke yelled back, finally allowing her voice to take on the same ridiculous boom as her mother’s, causing the woman to flinch back a little. “This isn’t the Ark, mom, and I don’t have to play by your rules regardless of what you might think of me!! You may be the Chancellor, but I am in charge of my own clan, and I will do what I damn well please.”

Abby’s jaw had dropped by the time Clarke was finished, her expression flashing varying degrees of fury and a level of hurt Clarke couldn’t bear to pay too much mind to regardless of the words flying between the two of them now. After all, Abby had only just gotten Clarke back, and the amount of catching up the two of them had to do still rivaled that of two strangers attempting to learn each other’s back-stories under the pressure of a measly hours. She was the only one who’d seemed to have an issue with any of this, though…

Roan and Jax were already well on their way back to Azgeda by now, the latter having accepted Clarke’s proposal of his return home in the company of his daughter with great enthusiasm. Roan, for his part, was relatively impartial to the whole arrangement, but Clarke didn’t miss the slight glint of what she wanted to believe was gratitude at her having trusted him with such authority – if only to be replaced by his usual nonchalance on moments later... In the meantime, Echo was wholly thrilled about everything, but she attempted to keep her pleasure masked as she remained by Clarke’s side, prepared to follow any and every command she could be given in the coming times ahead.

Gustus and Titus had shown little resistance to the plan, as well, both men understanding that this was simply one of the many diplomatic duties the Commander had to attend to outside of the city, despite Gustus’s disgruntlement at having been saddled with Titus’s company for such an extended period of time. Indra, too, was incredibly receptive of the plan, her sentiment wholly in support of a more intensified search for the missing children to take place, much to Clarke’s surprise – just as Kane’s had been.

Lincoln, Octavia, and Bellamy had gotten permission from their respective superiors to accompany the search party if only for the individual additions their respective skills would provide to the group. Wells, too, had propositioned Nyko to allow him to go along as the party’s designated healer, the older man only slightly reluctant to comply with the request.

(If it was an unspoken given that Raven would accompany Anya wherever she was assigned, no one brought any attention to the fact, simply letting it slide in favor of playing along with their part.) Naturally, then, the only person left to take issue with any part of the plan was Abby, the older woman having taken the news of the patterned kidnappings and the proposed plan with somewhat of an aghast expression on her face – as if she couldn’t believe that anyone would have devised such an elaborate scheme without consulting her first...

Abby and Clarke continued to stare at one another with unrelenting heat, the two of them refusing to budge for the sake of anyone else in the room as they waited for a moment both knew would never come. Abby scoffed, turning her back on Clarke and striding to the far side of the room – as if the physical space between them might present her with a better opportunity for response.

Clarke shot an apologetic gaze in Lexa’s direction, the girl seated atop her throne and surrounded by her advisors who all wore expressions of forced impassivity, creeping discomfort. Lexa’s opaque gaze softened for Clarke’s eyes alone, the girl giving the slightest nod of her head as if to say, it’s alright, I’m right here with you.
Down the steps from the throne stood Bellamy beside Wells, the two of them sharing an uncomfortable glance as they crossed their arms in surprising sync, both deciding to look down at the floor in the same moment. Clarke nearly laughed at the sight of it.

Raven and Octavia stood not too far from them, both looking equal parts awkward and impatient as they itched to remove themselves from such an environment – Octavia most likely longing to head to the base of the Tower where Lincoln was preparing the allotted number of saddlebags for imminent departure.

Kane – bless his heart – had followed Abby to the other side of the room, the man engaging her in a heatedly whispered discussion of some sort as he attempted to placate her.

Finally, after what felt like hours of waiting, the two of them turned around, Abby with an expression that screamed of finality – of a dare to question her resolve. Kane, on the other hand, looked slightly green.

“As a part of the Commander’s Coalition and a valued member of the Council of Clans, I would like to take part in the search, as well,” she announced, her voice taking on an authoritative air that Clarke was only ever used to hearing in the context of motherly scolding. “I will leave my most trusted advisor and ambassador, Marcus Kane, behind with Indra to see to it that our trading situation is sorted out properly… Beyond that, I request the Commander’s permission to take part in this mission of utmost importance – as the Chancellor of Skaikru, not as a mother.”

Lexa looked to Clarke immediately, eyes widening minutely in silent question, hesitance. In that instant, Clarke felt a wave of exhaustion wash over her and quash any spike of anger that might’ve taken hold within her chest.

*Enough of this… Let her win this one.*

Sighing heavily and rubbing her eyes with the backs of her hands, Clarke just nodded subtly, acquiescing, giving no warning before turning on her heels and striding from the throne room.

She didn’t miss the way multiple pairs of eyes immediately seemed glued to her back, how her mother called her name out in alarm – but she ignored it all.

The two of them would now have plenty of time to yell at each other over the coming weeks – Abby had just made certain of that.

For now, all Clarke wanted to do was get away from her, relish in the freedom to walk away while she still had the chance.

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“*God,* I wish I’d been able to yell at my mom like that when she was alive,” Raven chuckled, her voice dramatically longing as she, Clarke, Echo, and Octavia rode the elevator down. “Would’ve given her the heart attack she *deserved.*”

Octavia and Echo laughed, Clarke simply shaking her head as they continued to descend. The three of them had followed her out of the throne room in haste, Clarke having informed them that they were to make themselves useful and help her with final arrangements if they insisted on shadowing her.
They arrived at the base of the Tower momentarily, the four of them stepping out only to be greeted by Lincoln and an excited Belou who immediately began rambling to Clarke in Trig about his day shadowing in the Tower. It was a welcome distraction, though, a lovely change of pace as the six of them made their way out into the dead of night lit by the torchlight of the marketplace, barely more than a soul afoot now.

Their caravan would depart at sunrise, and Clarke wanted to secure all details as soon as possible so that she and Lexa could retire for a couple hours of much-needed rest –

“Clarke!” She turned toward the sound of her name, startled to find the unfamiliar sound belonging to none other than Thomas, the massive – and apparently bearded – boy lumbering towards the group with Maya in tow.

Before she could even take another breath, she found herself engulfed in a bearlike embrace and lifted off the ground, the feeling like embracing a tree trunk where Thomas stood as near-solid muscle – ever the gentle giant, though. He pulled back, tears streaming unhidden down his face as he smiled down at Clarke in utter awe. Maya stepped into view at his elbow, an apologetic smile on her face as she glanced at Thomas with obvious fondness – that which could only be possess through great intimacy, no less.

So that’s why they’ve been living alone together so comfortably for so long, then…

“My queen?” came Echo’s worried voice from just behind Clarke, the warrior obviously prepared to defend her queen.

“It’s alright, Echo – they’re friends,” Clarke assured her, returning Thomas’s smile easily as he still held her in his arms. After a moment, though, he released her, stepping back and looking down at his feet like a bashful child where Maya took his hand.

Maya stepped forward, an almost-pleading expression on her face as she met Clarke’s gaze. Taking a deep breath – and looking as though she might faint at the same time – she spoke, her voice as clear as day:

“Whatever you’ve got planned – wherever you’re going – we’re coming with you.”

Sunrise came far too soon, and Clarke believed that she’d barely more than blinked between the time that she’d been in the throne room to where she now sat atop her horse. Multiple pairs of hooves clomped against the cobblestone pathway as they made their way out of the central gates of the city, the collective sound of life within their party the only thing to be heard for miles around a city still sleeping – not quite as ready to greet the world with such purpose as they were.

She rode beside Lexa at the front of the caravan, Anya and Echo immediately behind them as the hierarchy of command spread through the ranks of riders. Much to Wells’s disgruntlement, Abby had been haphazardly stationed on the horse beside him as they made up the third tier, a space allotted to healers and “special guests” in a leader’s group – though how special Abby actually was to this mission was still up for debate…

Clarke tried not to think about her, though, focusing instead on how heavily her fur cloak felt atop her shoulders this morning – carrying the physical and symbolic weight of a diplomatic mission
that’d been received rather skeptically by the remaining clan leaders in Polis only moments before their departure.

She tried not to think of the missing kids whose fate was still so unclear, the parents of whom had probably cried rivers of hopelessness after so long spent in their absence – a kind of pain that was all too familiar to those riding at Clarke’s flank now.

Instead, she allowed her mind to lull to the sound of hooves clomping along the dirt pathway leading away from Polis, drifting longingly to a clearer image, something far more enticing than what almost certainly lay ahead in her current predicament – diamonds in the sky, lightness in the hearts of all, a promise of so much more actually kept…

A shining city on a hill.

Chapter End Notes

see you all in 2018!! cheers (;

(ps - fuck Ronald Reagan. hope you catch my drift lmao)
A Journey to the Unknown

Chapter Summary

Recap:
Much to Lexa’s disgruntlement, Clarke decides that their best way forward in the wake of new revelations surrounding the kidnappings is to go to the sites of the crimes, themselves - a journey that’d been unprecedented for leaders of their caliber to make. With Abby Griffin having forced her way into their little caravan, Clarke can do nothing more than hope for the best as she prepares to journey into the unknown.

Chapter Notes

TW: suicidal thoughts and behaviors

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It never got any easier.

Waking up, breathing, existing – all of it was like dragging barbed wire across naked skin slowly, meticulously, so as to feel every dig, every bite into flesh.

Lexa sat up with painstaking difficulty, the inside of her skull sloshing with the metaphorical weight of stale liquid. Without thinking, she swung her legs over the side of the mattress and onto the floor, the toe of her right boot clanking into the empty glass – her companion – and sending it skittering across the cold stone floor.

She groaned softly beneath her breath, realizing for the first time that she’d slept in her boots, in her full uniform. Pressing two fingers to her temple and massaging a circle, Lexa looked around her, taking in the carnage of her rampage from the night before.

The drawing curtains to her window were strewn across the floor, couch and reading chair overturned beside the short wooden table haphazardly decorated with papers, maps, distractions. Broken glass littered the battlefield with unpredictability, her other companion having taken the brunt of her fit as its delicate shape had collided with the concrete of the wall she’d thrown it into.

Lexa looked down at her hands now caked with dried blood, its oily complexion but the symptom of her affliction. The gashes in her palms were clean-cut, the smaller of the two already healing despite how permanent it’d felt to have broken glass cut her in such a way.

The way it felt… It was, well, agony, really – but it was also nothing at all.

Everything had become nothing as suddenly as it had given her meaning, and Lexa was at a loss for how to find anything anymore. She couldn’t find people, she couldn’t find places, and, on the worst of days, she couldn’t find thoughts. It was those days that scared her the most.

Fear, though – fear was nothing now, too. For, what is there to fear when you have nothing?
Nothing more to lose, to give, to take. If everything was nothing, then nothing was your everything – the opposite side of the coin to existence within the realm of consciousness, one might suppose.

Lexa felt every muscle and joint in her legs as she pushed to her feet, moving her bloodied hands to the clasp of her shoulder pauldron and allowing it to tumble off her frame and onto the floor. She stumbled forward, mildly surprised to find that stale liquid still running heavily between every fiber and tendon.

Truth be told, she’d never had much taste for the stuff – and still didn’t, really – but found that the burn of each drop searing down her throat and swirling within her chest was the only thing that could get her unconscious after the sun disappeared beneath the horizon. For, darkness had become far too frightening a place to go it alone, and her companions were nothing if not brazen in their defiance of such feelings.

If Titus could see her now, stumbling half-soberly in the direction of cold water with little regard for her position, he would probably take pleasure in ending her, himself. After all, his primary function as Fleimkepa was to the Spirit, not to Lexa. Try as he may to find affection for the girl, it was only ever about the Commander – a Commander who was rather remiss of her duties as of late, no matter how many tasks the shell was able to complete without its occupant.

She would hold meetings, she would listen to complaints both new and old, and she would watch as trade borders took on minds of their own as they responded to the temperament of leaders without forethought. She would live each day to find the same patterns make her existence a matter of monotonous repetition – only now without the fear of some larger shadow looming over every borderland to keep them from dissenting too permanently –

Lexa slammed her fist against the stone of her vanity, forcing herself back to semi-consciousness and away from that place, that spot in her mind that was more of a laceration than a sight of thought. The force of it sent a ripple through the wall and into the mirror, causing enough of a stir so as to catch Lexa’s eye, drawing her gaze up to the figure she so adamantly tried to avoid.

What an odd thing it was to see the abyss that’d taken root within her mind reflected in the circles beneath her eyes, the sunken reminder of windows that used to display a soul now advertising a vacancy. Lips that had only just remembered how to curve towards the stars were now deflated, skin once so rich and kissed with blush now the pallor of cadavers. It was as if even the sheen of her hair had been stamped out with the golden flame of fire it used to so heavily rely on, its color and form as dull as the hanging tendrils of dead moss.

Lexa sighed from empty lungs, allowing the motion to hang her head below her shoulders, her frail hands grasping the cold edge of the counter and digging into open wounds.

She couldn’t go on like this. This wasn’t…. None of this was worth it.

For as long as she could remember, she’d put up with it – the slow killing of her humanity, the obvious asphyxiation of all the parts of herself that one might attribute to a living person. She’d tolerated it, accepted it – even embraced it at one point in the absence of the last pair of deadened eyes that’d cemented themselves on the backs of her eyelids forever.

But, this… This was entirely different.

This was allowing the parts of herself that’d so long been dying to find nurturing in the hands of someone else, only to have those hands snatched from her without warning, leaving her vulnerable to everything from the smallest twig to the heaviest stone. This was fighting the pull of what she’d always been taught was the greatest of nature’s weaknesses and finally giving in to the ecstasy of
such fragility, only to have the full force of its weight come back to knock her off her feet and sweep her away with it.

If love was weakness, then what of suffering? What of this soul-altering torment?

Lexa leaned down, turning the handle of her faucet and releasing a steady stream of icy water. Mechanically, unfeelingly, Lexa cupped a handful of the stuff and pitched it up into her face, the shock of its temperature too temporary to rouse her from this permanent state of nothingness. She cupped another handful and sipped it into her dry mouth, allowing its lack of flavor to war with the ghost of stronger liquids on her tongue.

Without her permission, Lexa’s mind flashed back to images of an older woman, her hair darker yet eyes familiar in a cage made of metal, a place as cold and dejected as the people who trudged its halls. The way the woman hadn’t been able to take her eyes off Lexa – as if she, herself, was the personification of threatening – had worn at the edges of a last fragment of sanity that’d yet gone un tarnished, every second of it more harrowing than the last.

Despite the excruciation of the meeting, though, – like bare feet on hot coals – Lexa had found something resembling comfort in the fleeting purpose of it all, of bringing yet another clan into the fold. A year ago, the thought of Skaikru even existing had provided her something to dream about – hope for a future in which they could truly be one, in which the next generation could grow up in the arms of Earth and Sky united.

Now, it was an ephemeral sort of rousing call, a reason to get out of bed at the break of dawn if only to quiet its keening and resume her silence.

Lexa straightened with rigid slowness, reaching out to fumble with the spigot as she stared the figure down, examining its vacancy with critical eyes and a crease between her brow. The vacancy was growing colder, its shadows grimmer, and Lexa knew it was almost time.

She’d seen it a million ways to one, that life-stealing reaper having been her earliest mentor as far back as she dared look. For, skin was never meant to conquer blade, the latter being the former’s far-superior adversary, and heads were nil without their bodies. Lexa had found that the limitations of mortality were easier seen than felt, which is why she believed this final falling action to be particularly arduous.

All she could do was feel it, and feelings that had once meant everything had proved to be nothing at all, and that was simply too much to bear.

The resolution didn’t need to be a spectacle, though – a blade drawn to vital veins, a rope to tender neck –

“Lex.”

A gasp choked unbidden from Lexa’s constricted throat, her hand unconsciously flying up to claw at it, her eyes focusing on the figure over her left shoulder – always her left – looking at her with unfathomable tragedy.

“Don’t leave me, Lex… Please don’t leave me.”

A sob ripped from Lexa’s chest as she shook her head profusely – whether to acquiesce to her madness or to shoo it from her mind, she could not say. This was…this was beyond pain, before oblivion. This was suffering.

“You left me – you left me!! What more do I have to give?! What more do you want from me?!”
Lexa cried through wracking sobs, her free hand surging up to smack the mirror, sending a tremor through that gorgeous outline – that vision of gold.

Love stared back at her, utterly puzzled, and Lexa couldn’t stand it anymore – she had to touch, to feel… She spun on her heels, heart thundering madly through every inch of her frame, only to be greeted by Nothing once more – no vision, no sunlight.

“No, no, no, no – come back!! Please, I –,”

Gold, in her periphery, retreated to their bed – that place of sacrament. Lexa scrambled after her, her breaths coming in short pants, her cries the pathetic wails of orphans as she nearly toppled into her bedroom, eyes scouring wildly for her sunshine.

“I didn’t mean it, I – please,” Lexa pleaded miserably, begging at shadows and ghosts as paper crumbled underfoot. “Please come back, I –,”

“Heda?”

The title stopped Lexa short, forcing her to whip around towards the figure gaping at her from the open doorway. Looking positively disturbed, Anya quickly moved to shut the door behind her with surprising gentleness, turning back around to fix Lexa with a depth of concern she’d never seen on the warrior’s face – a depth she couldn’t bear – in eyes far too glossy to do anything but dig deeper into never-healing wounds.

Turning her back on the girl, her last solid pillar, Lexa strode over to the open window and rested her filthy hands on the sill, her gaze drifting as close to the horizon as her mind would let it go.

“What is it, Anya?” she asked quietly, almost breathlessly, as if the answer to the question might just determine her fate forvermore.

Lexa heard the faintest of rustles behind her, the telltale signs of discomfort, as the warrior’s next words left yet another piece inside of her to wither away and crumble within the iron grip of cruelty’s existence:

“A Plain Riders messenger has just arrived after a hasty two-week journey, and I – well… A child has gone missing.”

_____________________________________________

It was much easier jogging.

Clarke could keep an even pace right along with the caravan, and it saved her hips the endless hell of near-continuous horseback riding. Plus, doing her own moving helped with the phantom pains from old injuries – reminders of her past still heavy in her bones.

It’d been exactly two weeks to the day since they’d left Polis, and the monotonous cycle of it all was beginning to fray her last nerve; wake up at the break of dawn, ride until someone in the caravan complained loudly enough for them all to stop and eat a bite, resume riding at a quicker pace to take advantage of noonday sun, ride until the moon replaced the sun, stop for the night to make camp,
mingle with the nearest locals who’d come to pay their respects to the Commander, train a bit with Anya, sleep.

Rinse, repeat.

Every clan they’d encountered thus far had been more welcoming than the last – Rock Line, in particular – and their entire group seemed to experience a massive boost in morale every time they stopped near a merchant’s outpost or small village. Messages were sent to and from Polis at every stop, updating the Commander’s advisors and allies of their progress as well as providing further instruction for the maintenance of the city.

Azgeda, for what it was worth, seemed to be functioning rather well at Roan’s command – though only a single message had reached them so far – and Clarke couldn’t help but feel grateful to the prince for his continued loyalty to her, no matter how complicated their relationship continued to be. All Clarke could do was promise herself that she’d deal with him later, regardless of whether or not later actually came…

Training was going well, too, and Clarke could feel herself working up to a point at which exposure to the bell might actually be a survivable option. Although she knew she could never truly prepare herself to hear that wretched sound, her physical strength was approaching an all-time high, and she couldn’t help but be bolstered by the amount of support and encouragement she was being showered with at every turn. Even her mother had provided a general compliment of her form at one point or another…

For Clarke, though, her biggest obstacle was more than quickly becoming her own mind, as most of her days had been spent in silent contemplation, turning various sparks of lingering trauma into full-blown mental debacles – all of which ended in some manner of self-deprecation. It didn’t help that Abby insisted on poking her head into Clarke’s periphery at every blooming turn, asking far-too invasive questions than the girl was comfortable answering in front of full-blooded warriors. Abby would then sense this hesitance in her daughter and it would always, without fail, lead to a spat of empty, half-hearted words thrown at one another simply because they knew no other words to speak. Eventually, though, the flames would settle beneath the pot, and the two of them would rather awkwardly fall back into a pattern of forced small talk until some merciful soul inevitably came along to relieve one of them.

Such had become the nature of Clarke’s relationship with her mother, but she didn’t know what else to do – didn’t know how else to feel, really, when all was said and done.

Truth be told, her initial assessment upon seeing the woman again had been correct: they really didn’t know each other. Though the better angel on Clarke’s shoulder had convinced her that Abby had been there for her at some crucial points in the past – had given her the kind of conditional love that’d brushed shoulders with the unconditional – there was no denying the basic truth of it all: Abby Griffin was a source of great pain for Clarke, the kind which could be dulled to an ache on the best of days and akin to an open wound on the worst, but never quite shaken.

And, if Clarke was quite honest with herself, a cause of great shame.

For, when Clarke looked back at her time on Earth – through all of the turmoil, ecstasy, and everything in between – she was startled to realize just how few times her mother had ever slipped into her thoughts and, if she had, it’d only ever been to recount some sore spot in her memory that’d come to be associated with the woman. And Clarke was ashamed – ashamed of the cloud that rolled across her clarity whenever the mere mention of her mother came about, ashamed of the poison that rolled to the tip of her tongue whenever she addressed the woman, ashamed of all the times she’d failed hundreds only to care about the single face she could picture looking down on her with
disappointment…

Ashamed to stand in front of Abby a murderer now, the blood of countless strangers on her hands, all with some sort of unresolved chip laying waste to her shoulder.

It was these thoughts that cycled through Clarke’s mind as she looked at her mother, forced to spend an elongated time with someone who she couldn’t even begin to know how to address, and it was those thoughts that were starting to drive her mildly insane – along a slightly different vein than the controlled chaos she normally felt swirling inside of her.

There was reprieve, though.

Raven, with her predictably pointless yet sharp-tongued wit, never missing a beat to antagonize Clarke just to the edge of the point where the two of them might’ve been a year ago had fate not intervened. Anya, with her unflinching stoicism and faintly lofty demeanor, always only two steps behind the mechanic she so clearly adored despite her public discretion – always ready to school Clarke in combat should the warrior catch wind of any taunting on the subject. Echo and Wells, respectively, their balancing acts of unwavering loyalty and relentless friendship becoming something of pillars on which Clarke could lean, the two of them having found something of a kinship in one another – out of a like-minded steadfastness and genuine dispositions, Clarke suspected. Maya and Thomas with their wide eyes and eager faces, each of them desiring vindication for a number of different reasons, neither so sure they would find it.

And then, of course, there was Lexa.

_Lexa, Lexa, Lexa…_

The sweetest of names, the gentlest of souls – _her_ Lexa.

Clarke couldn’t even begin to put into words the sheer amount of _feeling_ that swelled within her body at the sight of the girl by her side throughout this journey – always in her periphery, never more than arms-length away even in moments where she couldn’t _physically_ be beside Clarke. Being with her like this, regardless of the capacity… It was like swallowing sunshine, like capturing a dusting of stars in the palm of your hand – the universe at your complete and utter disposal.

It was healing, and it was exactly what Clarke had known she’d needed from the moment someone had first described to her what love meant – how home could take the shape of a person far more permanently than any one place.

More than ever before, though, Lexa had become Clarke’s rock, the smooth surface to her capsizing vessel. Without fail, Lexa was there every time Abby got too close, always lingering just far enough away so as to give the illusion of privacy whilst still staying true to her purpose, her instinctual desire to protect Clarke at all cost. She made sure Clarke’s canteen was full to the brim at every opportunity, maintained with the girl’s painstakingly slow eating pace if only to ensure that Clarke finished every last bite, and never let Clarke’s eyes drift to a close at night unless the girl’s head was burrowed comfortably into her chest. On the more difficult nights, Lexa would trace gentle patterns into the scars on Clarke’s back, taking painstaking care to marvel rather than dwell, and it was, perhaps, the kindest thing anyone had ever done for her – though, truth be told, the list of “kindest things” every done for Clarke had all been done by Lexa, so this was simply a significant drop in the bucket.

If anyone in the caravan noticed their Commander’s obvious doting or the girl’s midnight retreat into the darkness of Clarke’s tent until just before sunrise, they made absolutely zero show of it – whether out of respect for their leader or desensitization to the confirmation of a relationship they’d already
suspected, Clarke couldn’t be sure.

All she knew was that the caravan was made up of the elitist of the elite, the most highly-skilled and fully-trusted members of Trikru’s high guard. If anyone from any clan could be relied upon for the utmost level of quintessential discretion, it would be the warriors within this caravan – many of whom Clarke would’ve trusted with her life, regardless.

As for Abby… The woman saw what she wanted to see – a picture which did not include the Commander of the Twelve Clans as anyone other than a figure of whom to be cautiously wary. Should she decide to blink through her rose-colored goggles, Clarke might have quite the conversation on her hands – for the primary reason of Clarke’s intentional exclusion of any such connection.

Until that point, though, Clarke relished to simply enjoy every moment in which those fateful words would not have to be spoken.

The brisk air of the morning was enough to bring some of the only fond memories of Azgeda to the forefront of Clarke’s mind, and a small smile twitched at her lips as she jogged along.

She was setting a quicker pace than usual, leaving the caravan some feet behind her as her muscles began that familiar – and welcome – burn. Clarke knew that Lexa didn’t like it when she got too far ahead of the rest of the group, but she couldn’t help it – horses could just be so damn slow sometimes.

“You two having sex yet?” came Raven’s voice from directly beside her.

Clarke nearly tripped and lost her stride she was so startled, her heart thundering as she shouldered Raven for coming up on her like that. Raven laughed somewhat breathlessly as the two of them recovered, found that quickened pace once more. Clarke supposed this fell somewhere along the more annoying side of the spectrum of Raven’s near-constant antagonism whenever she got the chance.

“You’re a moron, Raven,” Clarke shot back, her brows furrowing as she dodged another taunt.

“Excuse me?” Clarke asked between breaths, throwing Raven a bewildered glance. Raven raised an eyebrow, clearly unconvinced.

“You heard me, Griff.” Clarke simply rolled her eyes, snorting despite her aching lungs.

Truth was, they hadn’t – not since… before. It was simply too much for either of them still, both of them still caught up in the breathlessness of finding one another again, swapping heartfelt omissions in the darkness of shared tents between sleep and waking hours –

“Have you?” Clarke fired back, throwing a sidelong glance Raven’s way and knowing full-well that the girl caught her double-meaning.

“As a matter of fact –,”

A blood-curdling scream cut Raven’s answer off with a brutal force, the sound reverberating through the scenery and back into the caravan. The two girls came to a screeching halt, startled by another couple of cries in the same pitch – with that same level of bone-chilling dread in every call, the screams of a child from all that Clarke could presume.

Clarke only had to glance at Raven for the shortest of seconds before the girl nodded her head, taking off at a sprint in the direction of the screams – at a complete perpendicular angle to the path they’d been traveling along. Clarke immediately took off after her, matching Raven’s pace with ease.
and doing everything in her power to ignore the pang in her chest at the sound of their names being shouted in varying degrees of alarm from somewhere off behind them.

While another scream sounded to drive their pace impossibly faster, Clarke took stock of the weapons on her person: two hunting blades, a long knife, and her favorite dagger. She was dressed in a sleeveless cotton tunic tucked into her weapons belt with the usual dark pants and boots, only without any of the usual protective gear she sported across her chest and other vulnerable areas. Glancing at Raven, she could see that the girl was in much the same predicament, give or take a blade, and the realization only quickened the blood racing in Clarke’s veins as they thundered through increasingly tricky terrain.

Though the land had flattened significantly the further west the caravan had gotten, patches of forest were still relatively commonplace, and the untended brush between clan settlements became harder and harder to navigate the deeper one strayed from marked paths. As it were, Clarke found herself swatting all manner of branches and foliage out of her way as she heard more than saw Raven doing the same beside her, and the lack of a proper view of mere ten feet in front of them only added to the complications of their predicament – while also cutting any exposed piece of flesh every which way. On top of it all, neither of them were giving chase with any particular degree of subtlety, both of them mindlessly stomping along –

“Please, no!!”

The first discernible words, followed by another set of desperate screams – this time only some odd yards in front of them now.

Clarke unsheathed her long blade from her belt, listening for more voices as Raven did the same, the first having been unmistakably female.

Moments later, the two girls were breaking through the thick foliage only to have to skitter to a blazing stop to avoid tumbling down a steep and sudden incline covered in fallen leaves with scattered trees at random intervals. A little way down the hill was a woman crumpled to her knees with her back turned to them, one hand gripping her abdomen and the other extended towards the bottom of the hill where Clarke watched the retreating back of some dark clad figure – a man, judging by the size and stature of his body – making his way further into the forest with a distraught little boy haphazardly thrown over his shoulder.

She and Raven broke into action, Raven heading towards the woman as Clarke careened down the hill at far too reckless a pace.

“Cla –!!”

“Stay with her!!” Clarke shouted, throwing a brief glance at a panicked Raven from over her shoulder and cringing at the amount of blood covering the front of the crumpled woman, scarlet liquid oozing between her fingers from where she clutched her abdomen – multiple stab wounds, most likely.

Clarke couldn’t dwell on that now, though, the retreating back of the assailant barely in her view as she pushed herself faster than she’d ever gone before. Her breaths were coming from hyperventilation, her muscles screaming at her to slow down and take a breath, but Clarke simply pushed past her body’s warning signs and further into the forest.

The terrain had flattened out again and there were far fewer trees, but Clarke still found herself cutting through obstacles with her blade from every which way, grunting in frustration as another branch snagged her cheek. The next moment, though, Clarke heard the telltale wails of a child from
maybe fifty yards in front of her, her view of the assailant marred by thicker tree cover.

With a renewed spike of adrenaline surging through her, Clarke sprinted impossibly faster, barreling towards the thick tree line as she wielded her blade in preparation to cut the branches out of her way.

The second she broke into the tree cover, utter chaos ensued.

\textit{CRACK}

Something like the sound of a massive whip lashing into the tree trunk directly to Clarke’s left sent nature’s debris flying into her face as she continued to sprint. Letting out a startled yelp, Clarke’s arm flew up to shield her eyes from more debris right at the same moment she cut too close to yet another tree trunk, her right elbow smacking into the bark with dizzying momentum.

And, just like that, Clarke’s unstoppable force had met an immovable object.

The collision sent her ricocheting, her pace having been too fast to allow her space to recover as she lost her footing, feeling the toe of her boot catch on a fallen branch as she went soaring into the air.

Feeling time slow to a crawl as her adrenaline spiked, Clarke made a desperate twist of her torso in mid-air to avoid doing down flat on her face, instead opting to force her good shoulder to take the brunt of the force as she hit the ground hard and began to roll. She squeezed her eyes shut painfully tight and tucked her arms in as best she could as she tumbled down the hill, her breath completely stolen from her as she was helpless to protect her extremities.

Something hard and sharp – a stray rock, most likely – snagged her hip as she went, causing her to yelp as she continued to blindly roll. She couldn’t process the pain, though, couldn’t process \textit{anything}, really, as her mind went into self-preservation mode, the only detectable sound that of her punctuated breathing and labored heartbeat.

Suddenly, though, the ground seemed to shift beneath her, the more forgiving grassy slope giving way to punishing stone as she seemed to be approaching a cliff face. With a startled yelp, Clarke threw her arms out in the attempts to catch at something, anything, that might keep her from dropping off the edge. Her nails scraped fruitlessly against rock, her legs kicking against nothing as her momentum only seemed to grow – and that’s when she realized.

She was going to have to let herself fall – partly, at least.

Steeling herself for the inevitable, Clarke felt her stomach flip over itself as she went into free-fall, the sensation sending chills up her spine as she made a last-ditch effort to grab on to the cliff face. Remarkably, amazingly, her hands caught a dip in the stone, her fingers positively screaming as she dug them into the unyielding surface and held on for dear life, her torso having to adjust to the momentum shift as it slammed down onto the side of the rocks.

The breath was immediately knocked out of her, leaving her to sputter and gasp as she quite literally dangled off the edge of a cliff. Chancing a look down below, Clarke’s heart nearly swooped out of her chest as she took in the generous drop to the next level of forest below, the tops of the trees at least ten feet below were her feet were hanging.

Every part of her throbbed from the tumble, her hands and shoulders, in particular, demanding to be freed from their predicament, but she couldn’t acquiesce, her life quite literally depending on their ability to keep her stable. Tilting her head as far upwards as it could go, Clarke realized with a dangerous drop of her stomach that she couldn’t see above the cliff’s edge anymore – could only really make out the sky above her head and the rocks immediately obscuring her vision.
Great. Just, great.

She was completely vulnerable, no foreseeable out in place as her biceps and forearms trembled against even the thought of trying to pull herself up, and all her mind could do was slip into a place of self-loathing – beating herself up for even getting into this position in the first place.

She’d lost him. She’d let the assailant disappear into thin air, a stolen child in his arms, and all she could do now was hang here and wait to be rescued.

Almost immediately, though, the wave of guilt was stopped short somewhere in her chest when she remembered – *crack.*

*Like a whip, a leather whip… No, it couldn’t have been…*

*A gun.*

Her heart thudding unevenly at the realization, Clarke narrowed her eyes at the atmosphere, her mind going into overdrive as suddenly nothing made sense.

The assailant had *shot* at her. Whoever it was, they had the comfort and tenacity with the metallic firearm to get within a foot of her – from the low ground and through thick tree cover, no less –

“Clarke?! Clarke!!”

The sound of her name shouted in pure and unadulterated terror sent Clarke’s heart thundering in her chest, her mind placing the voice almost instantaneously.

“Lex – *help*!!” she yelled back as loudly as she could, not daring to adjust her grip as a rivulet of sweat dripped into her eye, her hands feeling as if they were quite literally tearing at the seams.

She couldn’t see the other girl at all, but she faintly made out the sound of thundering footfalls over her own roaring heart, Lexa apparently near-sprinting down the hill in her panicked haste.

A sharp pang lit up the entirety of her still-weakened right shoulder and Clarke cried out in pain, her vision spotting black as she was forced to let go of the cliff with that hand. Her left arm immediately responded in kind, a shooting bolt of pain seizing at her forearm as she dangled single-handedly, her grip slackening not of her own volition –

Clarke screamed in agony as she let go, squeezing her eyes shut as she was unable to hold herself up any longer –

She was falling again.

“*NO!!*”

Clarke’s eyes flew open, blinking rapidly upwards to reveal the blurry outline of Lexa, the girl holding on to Clarke’s one hand with both of hers off the edge of the cliff – the sensation of being saved. Blinking through the blur, Clarke made out the mask of steeled determination on Lexa’s face, the tight press of her lips beneath furrowed brows and wild eyes – eyes that were locked on to Clarke as if she were the very focal point of the universe, itself, the only thing holding all of the outlying pieces together.

“Don’t you *dare* let go of my hands, Clarke – *don’t you dare let go.*” Lexa spoke the words through gritted teeth, a fiery commandment that even the most authority-averse had to honor.
Clarke could only nod her head feverishly, her eyes brimming with tears containing more emotions than could be named at this point. Lexa’s eyes were ablaze as they seared into Clarke’s, not so much as blinking as she began to shift backwards on her stomach, bearing the brunt of the both of them in her lower back.

Refusing to take her eyes off of Clarke, Lexa continued to pull them both up, Clarke doing the best she could to assist with what little leverage she had. Lexa grunted in her struggle as their pace wavered, fighting against gravity to keep going.

Clarke’s chest was now pressed to the rocks, Lexa having worked her up so that her head was now peaking above the cliff’s edge. Locking her teeth together, Clarke used the uneven dips in the stone as support for her elbows, channeling her adrenaline into that part of her body as she propelled herself to waist-high above the edge with Lexa’s help.

Seeing her opportunity, Lexa cried out in a final surge of desperation, using Clarke’s upward momentum to her advantage as she surged up onto her knees and heaved, pulling Clarke the final couple of feet back onto the rocky cliff face.

Lexa collapsed backwards, pulling Clarke on top of her as the two girls gasped for breath, their hearts pounding against one another as Lexa locked her arms around Clarke’s waist, refusing to let go. Clarke closed her eyes and let her head droop so that it was tucked into the crook of Lexa’s neck, the other girl squeezing her tighter as Clarke breathed heavily against the bare skin there.

Clarke’s entire body positively ached, her arms and shoulders burning angrily as her torso shuddered against Lexa’s, the other girl’s hands now having knotted themselves into the sweat-soaked fabric clinging to Clarke’s back as she pressed a score of trembling kisses into Clarke’s hair.

The next moment, though, Lexa’s hands were meticulously combing over Clarke’s torso, searching for any sign of mortal injury as Clarke continued to huff. Almost immediately, Lexa’s fingertips grazed over the gash in Clarke’s hip where she’d caught the edge of a boulder on her way down, and Lexa’s breath caught in her chest, the girl gently but purposefully maneuvering Clarke on top of her so that she could get a better look.

Lexa sucked in a sharp breath as Clarke winced, her one hand gripping Clarke closer to her while the other lifted the fabric from around the wound. Lexa’s hands were noticeably trembling, her breaths coming out in short and labored gasps as she appeared to be getting incredibly worked up over the sight of Clarke’s injury.

Feeling a surge of protectiveness overwhelming her, Clarke lifted her head to scan Lexa’s face, her heart plummeting into some of her darkest places as she saw how pale Lexa was now, how her features seemed to have tightened over bone to the point where it looked painful. Despite her obvious state of panic, though, Lexa’s eyes were impossibly difficult to read, a million and one emotions flitting across her vision as she refused to meet Clarke’s gaze. She appeared utterly frozen, rendered completely rigid by the depth of her distress, and Clarke was helpless to do more than watch as Lexa spiraled deeper and deeper into a place that Clarke couldn’t see, couldn’t even hope to name…

“Lex, hey – look at me, Lex. Please,” Clarke breathed between ragged gasps, her voice incredibly gentle as she all but begged the girl to look at her, see her. She dragged trembling fingers across the stray pieces of hair clinging to Lexa’s forehead, hoping her touch might draw the girl out of whatever visceral reaction she was having now.

“I’m okay, love – I’m going to be just fine,” Clarke promised breathlessly, fervently, as Lexa continued to stare at Clarke’s side, still as stone save for her continuously labored breathing.
It was like they were back in Clarke’s room again, Lexa scrambling to get her back pressed as closely to the far wall as possible as Clarke entreated her, pleaded with her to see again. Or after the Challenge, even, watching as Lexa lifted her head from the mattress and immediately lost every part of her self-control as she sobbed, feeling all at once the anguish of everything that’d almost been stolen from yet again.

Clarke didn’t know how much more of this Lexa could take, how much more she could take, really, and the thought that she might be the cause of Lexa’s undoing – if she hadn’t already been – was enough to bring the tears back to the brim of her eyes.

*I can’t keep doing this… How do I stop doing this to her?*

*What if I can’t stop –*

“CLARKE!”

The shout abruptly cut through Clarke’s train of thought, forcing her head up just in time to see Echo and Wells crashing through the tree line, stopping just long enough to see Clarke sprawled on top of Lexa at the bottom of the hill with a massive wound in her side. Both sets of eyes went wide as they began a quick descent down the grassy slope, calling Clarke’s name again and again as they went.

At the sound of their approach, Lexa seemed to snap to immediately, cradling Clarke’s head in one of her hands as she used the other to gracelessly flip their positioning, laying Clarke flat out on her back atop the stone as she hovered above. Her expression was positively unreadable as she moved to tie Clarke’s tunic into place above the girl’s bleeding wound, leaving the gash free from risk of any accidental brush-ups. She was still cradling Clarke’s head as she did so, clearly avoiding Clarke’s gaze as she focused her attention on treating the wound as best she could with such limited resources, her hands uncharacteristically shaky in even the smallest of movements.

Within seconds, though, Wells and Echo had closed in around them, the two of them fretting over Clarke in their own unique ways. Clarke could practically feel Lexa hiding herself away as she refused to move from Clarke’s side, refused to break their point of contact as Echo and Wells began throwing out suggestions on how to get Clarke back up the hill and out of the forest.

Clarke couldn’t really hear any of it, though, far too preoccupied with analyzing every minute shift in Lexa’s expression to really worry about her own predicament. The fact that she couldn’t discern *anything* was enough to make her heart thud unevenly in her chest, her throat tightening with anxiety as she felt herself being lifted from the ground by multiple sets of hands, some of the Trikru guard appearing out of nowhere in her periphery as they made to form a human gurney for her.

With it becoming clearer and clearer by the minute that Lexa was pointedly avoiding Clarke’s gaze in favor of seeing to her effective rescue, Clarke loosed a deep and all-encompassing sigh, feeling something inside of her crack as she closed her eyes, allowing herself to be carried up and away from the cliff side.

The woman had died in Raven’s arm shortly after Clarke had given chase to her attacker.

From what Clarke could gather, the entire warrior contingent of their caravan – which was practically everyone, really – had fanned out in typical protocol for the apprehension of an assailant, the Commander and Anya being the first into the woods with Wells and Echo close behind.
Apparently, Lexa had been too caught up in sprinting after Clarke to give specific orders, so it was left up to Anya to instruct the guardsmen beyond basic protocol – which, when all was said and done, was part of her job as general regardless of circumstance.

Abby had been one of the last into the woods, struggling to keep up with the group when she’d finally gotten to Raven who was cradling the dying woman in her arms with Anya standing guard at her flank. It was obvious to all of them that the woman was going to die, the wound to her abdomen far too perfect to recover from, and all Abby could do was sit and watch as a young mother bled out before her eyes, an increasingly restless Anya circling them like a hawk protecting its kin.

When Abby had seen Clarke being carried from the deep of the woods with blood-stained close and a pained expression, though, all else had fallen by the wayside, the woman immediately snapping into doctor-mode with the added edge of frantic mother guiding her every movement. They’d brought Clarke back to the supply wagon at Abby’s command, Lexa barking orders all around as she refused to move even an inch from Clarke’s side. Wells had made to assist Abby as Echo continued to buzz around Clarke, unsure of what to do or how to channel her worry into something productive. That ended shortly, though, Clarke giving her orders to join the search party combing through the words as Lexa ordered their fastest rider ahead to the Plain Riders territory to inform them of the attack.

Meanwhile, Abby proved every bit as effective in the middle of a forest as she had in the most high-tech OR the Ark had to offer, utilizing what few medical supplies she had to clean and dress Clarke’s wound as the blonde barely made more than a sound, far too preoccupied to care about physical pain.

Lexa hadn’t spoken a word to her since they’d gotten back up the hill, never taking her eyes from Clarke’s wound or letting the girl get more than a few inches from her side as she continued to oversee the contingent’s reconnaissance efforts. It was as if Lexa had one purpose and one purpose, alone, and that was Clarke – making sure that she had proper medical care, that she never went without someone’s eyes on her, that she was protected by at least three skilled swordsmen at all times…

It would’ve almost been verging on embarrassing if Clarke couldn’t see the desperation behind it all, the fear that guided every command shouted by such a seemingly unwavering voice. It was enough to make that cracked place within her tear right open, and Clarke was once again struck by how much more painful these kinds of wounds were to her at this point than any sort of physical torture she could endure.

These were the kinds of wounds that made it impossible to sleep at night.

These were the kinds of wounds that never truly healed.

“You’re sure it was a gunshot, sweetheart?” Abby asked for what had to have been the fourth time in under ten minutes. The woman talked as she worked, putting the final dressings on Clarke’s wound as the girl sighed yet again, her eyes fluttering shut in exasperation.

“Yes, mom – positive. I know what a gun sounds like when it fires… Wells and Raven know exactly what to look for, too,” Clarke responded rather flatly, referring to the mini reconnaissance mission she’d sent her best friends on after Abby and Lexa had gotten her settled in the largest tent they’d pitched for the night – not too far from the sight of the stabbing, as it were.

Anya and two other Trikru guards had accompanied them, debriefed by their Commander on what to
do in the case that they miraculously stumbled across the assailant while out on their search. They’d been instructed to search for evidence of the bullet where it’d been fired into the trees, hopefully coming away with the shell, itself, so that Clarke could get a better look at it.

Beyond that, they had no other leads. This attack, while clearly fitting the profile of all the other cases Clarke and Lexa had studied so far, was, for all intents and purpose, random. Everything about the location, the timing, and even the identity of the slain woman was completely arbitrary, and Clarke couldn’t bear the thought of having to explain to the woman’s next of kin that she had no idea how she was going to provide them closure – or peace, for that matter.

All she could do now was wallow in the loose ends and unanswered questions, confined to a body that couldn’t quite seem to catch a break that, of course, her long-lost mother would now end up treating at every turn.

It just kept getting better, honestly.

“Oh, this’ll need to be changed once a day and we’ll have to monitor the wound closely for signs of infection, but other than that, I’d say you got out pretty lucky – especially considering that nasty fall,” Abby told her, meeting Clarke’s tired gaze with stern eyes in an expression that dared Clarke to argue.

Clarke simply nodded, gritting her teeth against the urge to respond with some smart remark that would surely end her up in an argument. Lexa remained painfully still beside Clarke, not taking her eyes off of the bandage now covering Clarke’s hip as Abby stepped up into her daughter’s personal space, bending to place a surprisingly gentle kiss to her forehead.

She lingered a moment longer than necessary, her breath slightly shaky as she stepped back to look down at Clarke with startlingly watery eyes.

“I’m glad you’re okay, sweetheart, but maybe try not to run into a gun fight with a knife next time, hm?” It was her mother’s attempt at humor, Clarke knew, but it only made the air thicker, eliciting a rather bizarre reaction from Lexa who immediately strode to the far side of the tent as soon as the words left her mother’s mouth.

She stood with her back turned to Clarke and Abby, shoulders rigid as the older woman watched her with a curious expression on her face, a swarm of implacable emotions crossing her gaze. The next moment, though, Abby looked back to Clarke, an uncomfortably knowing expression on her face as she nodded to herself.

“I’ll…let you two be, then… Get some rest, Clarke.”

With that, the woman strode to the entrance of the tent, hesitating for the briefest of moments at the entrance to throw one last weighted glance at the Commander before disappearing behind the flaps.

Clarke was left with her mouth hanging agape, her eyes glued to where her mother had just been standing as her heart throbbed in time with the rest of her body.

_Does she… she can’t possibly - ?_

_What the hell was that?_

_“Why?”_

The question was barely more than a whisper, only faintly detectable above the din of the rest of their caravan buzzing about camp beyond their tent, but it was enough to stop Clarke’s train of thought in
its tracks, her blood going instantly cold.

Lexa remained standing with her back turned to Clarke, her shoulders frozen in that same rigid set, hands clenched into fists by her sides. Clarke could do nothing more than stare at her, pushing herself up into a sitting position with pained slowness.

The next moment, though, Lexa was spinning on her heels, fixing Clarke with a look that was more agonizing than any one of the whip lashes that now permanently scarred her skin, far more altering than any such mark could ever be. It was raw, skin opening over bone, eyes alight with a brutal fire consuming a soul, and it was like an iron-knuckled fist right to Clarke’s chest.

“Why would you do that? Why would you run right into danger like that after –?” Lexa’s throat clicked shut, her gaze forced downward as she struggled to put words to flames. She closed her eyes, her face pale beneath the dark war paint as her lips flattened into a taut line.

For drawn-out moments afterwards, Lexa simply stood there, breathing through a tightened chest and statuesque posture as her knuckles grew whiter. Clarke could barely breathe.

“I don’t know how to…” Lexa shook her head, unable to finish her thought as she moved to pinch her brow between her thumb and pointer, her eyelids fluttering to a close. In that moment, Clarke didn’t think she’d ever seen the other girl look so exhausted.

“I don’t think I’ve been able to take a deep breath since you came back.”

At those words, the entire world around them seemed to slow to a stand-still, nature’s din quietening if only so that they could hear strength admit to its antithesis.

“Sometimes, when I first open my eyes in the morning, I forget… I forget that you were ever gone, that I failed you so miserably, and I –,” another shake of her head, her eyes squeezing impossibly tighter. “It hits me all at once, all of these things that I – that I just…I don’t know how to deal with. Things I have never known how to handle…”

In the back of her mind, Clarke acknowledged that she was readily depriving her lungs of oxygen at this point, but she really couldn’t risk it – couldn’t risk that she might interfere even the slightest bit with her ability to listen right now.

And listening felt like the most important thing she had ever done.

“Battle, I can do – strategy is simple, cut and dry, and it is either success or failure, life or death. Supply allocation, diplomacy, foresight – all are things that I pride myself on understanding at a fundamental level. But, you…” At this, Lexa finally met Clarke’s eyes again, and it was as if the fire was spreading between them, smoke filling both of their lungs beyond what was survivable.

“You have brought me to my knees.”

It was a confession, perhaps the most vulnerable set of words Lexa had ever pieced together, and Clarke was speechless. Thin trails of tears carved a path down her cheeks, her skin vibrating with every feeling she couldn’t even begin to know how to express.

“The Mountain, Nia, the Challenge, this… It is as if the ground wishes me to sink further, wants my knees to dig deeper, and I do not know how to do that.”Lexa’s own tears were streaking through her paint now, her eyes alight with that same feral light, and Clarke didn’t know what to do.

“There isn’t a second that goes by that my worry for you doesn’t eat at me, that I don’t feel it clawing at the back of my neck, and I can’t – I don’t…” Lexa was close to hysterics now, and
Clarke mirrored her completely, unable to do anything more than reach out for her as the girl practically stumbled towards Clarke, her hand clapped over her mouth to muffle her whimpers as Clarke wrapped her in a trembling embrace.

They held each other like that as time stuttered to find its pace again, struggling against every ounce of convention as the two souls immersed in its tempo threatened to undo what was meant to be. Clarke hid her face in Lexa’s chest, crying silently into the rough fabric there as Lexa’s fingers tangled in her hair, every inch of her shaking with sobs.

“I didn’t think…I was going to survive myself when you were gone… Every thought felt like it was someone else’s – as if some greater power was pulling my strings, and I was helpless against each and every one of them, and I just…I-I don’t…know how to be myself anymore, Clarke.”

Lexa’s broken words only made Clarke cry harder, left her utterly devastated as she pressed herself impossibly closer to the girl’s frame.

What could she possibly say to that? How could she possibly provide solace? When you are the cause and cure of an affliction, what comfort could you really give?

Truth be told, Clarke felt the exact same way. She hadn’t felt like Clarke Griffin in ages, and she couldn’t even remember what that name used to mean when all was said and done…

They were different people now, Lexa and Clarke, altered souls entwined together with little safeguard from the horrors the world incessantly threw them. There was no manual for this, no guidebook on how to be themselves – or how to even be, period.

There was only survive; survive and hope for a better tomorrow, a day when neither of them had to try to remember how to be happy…

“I’m sorry, Lex…I’m so sorry,” Clarke whispered into the girl’s chest, speaking between shaky sobs and clutching at Lexa more desperately as her hip screamed in protest. “I never should’ve…run off like that, I –,”

“I know, hodnes, I know,” Lexa cooed between her own sharp intakes of breath, her finger knotting themselves almost permanently into Clarke’s braids.

They continued to hold each other for endless moments more, both of them gradually finding their strength the longer they held onto each other. One of Lexa’s hands drifted down to the area between Clarke’s shoulder blades, tracing gentle circles into the fabric clinging to skin there.

“Just…promise me something, Clarke,” Lexa spoke after another moment, her hands coming around to hold either side of Clarke’s face as she directed the girl’s eyes upwards, holding her gaze with banked passion burning through every part of her expression. “Promise me that you will not go it alone next time, that you will wait for me – no matter what happens. Promise me, Clarke.”

Clarke could only hold Lexa tighter, nodding emphatically at words that felt far more weighted than they sounded. Before she could even process her own actions, Clarke was reaching out to pull Lexa’s face to hers, capturing her lips in a kiss that spoke of everything she’d never be able to say – of apologies, of promises, of love, of forever…

Although neither of them knew how to be the same people they were before, they could still be Clarke and Lexa, Earth and Sky – two souls joined together by this impossible, life-altering love. Through thick and thin, they could still be.

And, maybe someday, they would be able to thrive.
“Heda!! Up ahead!!”

The lead rider pointed in the direction of the sign, the marker that signaled they had finally done it.

Clarke hummed appreciatively at the sign, the bold letters that spelled “PLAIN RIDERS BOUNDARY” in midnight-black paint. Her hip was bothering her more than usual this morning, and Clarke was more than relieved to have reached their destination – if only the first of many they had planned…

She looked sideways at Echo on her left, the warrior meeting her gaze with a raised brow as the terrain seemed to almost immediately shift from dense forest to rolling hills and clear skies for miles ahead of them.

Looking to her right, she met Lexa’s gaze already on her, that stoic mask flickering from determination to unhidden adoration for the girl riding beside her. Despite all that still lay ahead, Clarke couldn’t help but rejoice, reveling in this temporary moment of accomplishment as the edged closer to the border line.

Clarke inclined her head in a gesture of respect, eliciting a smirk from Lexa as her eyes glittered playfully:

“After you, Commander.”

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know - I finally gave in to a lil bit of Lexa's POV. Idk if I did her any justice, but I wanted to give a little more insight into how she's been feeling and where her head's at, cause I know I've still (intentionally) left a lot of conversations unspoken and questions unanswered at this point - which I 100% plan on hashing out in coming chapters btw.

Hope you guys have been well, though!! I'm so sorry about this wait - school has been kicking my ass and I've been having a super hard time finding moments to write. Currently counting the moments toward my graduation in May lmao.

Regardless, I hope you enjoyed this one, and I'd love to hear your thoughts. This plot line is really only just getting started oops.

(Apologies for any typos, editing time is slammed rn).

Until next time...
The Old Foes of Ancient People

Chapter Summary

Recap:
Clarke, Lexa, and the rest of their chosen companions journeyed west from Polis in search of answers regarding the latest kidnapping in a string of child abductions happening without rhyme or reason throughout the 13 Clans. Only a short distance from their final destination, though, the crew happens upon a kidnapping just off the beaten path, too late to prevent death from befalling one of the victims. Clarke gave chase without even thinking about it, falling short of apprehending the mysterious kidnapper upon narrowly missing a bullet fired her way. After nearly falling off the side of a cliff to her death and sustaining a couple minor injuries, Clarke and Lexa start to come to terms with the fact that this is their life now, and death will only ever narrowly avoid them until the moment it doesn't. With this and so much more weighing on both of their shoulders, the crew arrives at the boundary of the Plain Riders' nation, a land of grassy hills and rollings plains with so much more than possibility awaiting them...

Chapter Notes

Hello again folks!!

Good LORD it's been a minute... all I can say is that your final semester of college is no joke, and neither is all the stuff that comes afterwards lmao.

All that to say, I'm settled in a new place with a new job and doing just fine, and I hope that anyone still sticking with this story is doing the same!! I AM planning on writing this story until its intended completion, so if you're still interested in what I have to write about this particular version of these characters, I can promise you'll be able to see an end to this monstrosity eventually lol. No telling how long it'll take but...we'll get there lmao.

Anyways, hope you enjoy this one, and I'm so so sorry for such a long wait.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Clarke had never seen anything like it.

The Plain Riders' territory was like something out of one of the old movies from Before that her father used to recite by heart – Westerns, she thought they were called. Rolling hills, four-legged creatures be-speckling the green at random intervals, modest cottages of wood and stone situated atop almost every single gentle peak... It was like walking around in a sunlit dream.

Traversing the territory had taken a couple of days, but they were finally coming upon the capitol city, New Dakota, one of the only semi-populated hubs Clarke had seen for miles. The capitol was barely more than a couple of miles in circumference, the tallest building a multi-storied wooden cabin
situated amongst smaller wooden structures and pointed cloth tents labelled with colorful signs along intersecting dirt roads.

Residents milled about the town center in lightweight, earthy-toned garb, seemingly unbothered by the armed caravan looming atop the hillside overlooking their capitol.

“You coming, Griff?” Raven asked, cutting into Clarke’s reverie with an amused quirk to her brow.

It was only then that Clarke realized she was holding up the entire group, the Commander having halted their caravan’s advance to account for Clarke’s drifting horse as it strayed off the beaten path at her unconscious direction. The Commander eased her horse over to where Raven’s hooved restlessly at the ground, stopping a few steps beyond the mechanic’s position to put herself closer to Clarke.

A single sunbeam seemed to catch in the gem of Lexa’s eyes, throwing fractals every which way as gorgeous light framed the girl’s hair like some holy vision. The moment their eyes met, a smile more brilliant than any light Clarke had ever seen spread across Lexa’s painted features, the energy of the sun seemingly banked just below the surface of her gaze, vivacious and humming.

Clarke could’ve sworn her heart had taken flight…

Her sappy musings were interrupted by Raven’s sudden approach, the girl leaning over in her saddle so that she could speak closer to the shell of Clarke’s ear:

“You know, if the two of you decided to just up and have sex right smack dab in the middle of the Riders’ capitol, it might be less obvious…”

Raven took off down the hill before Clarke could reach out and smack her, forcing the blonde to follow suit as she chased her idiot friend right into the heart of the Plain Riders’ nation.

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Hours later, Clarke found herself slipping out of one of the backdoors to the capitol’s central gathering hall – the large wooden cabin she’d spotted earlier –, the din of animated conversations and laughter following her into the night air as she shut the door behind her. She was just short of overwhelmed, feeling a little too numbed by all the over-stimulation to really process anything properly.

It was warmer here than she’d grown accustomed to in any place she’d been so far, and Clarke pulled restlessly at her uniform, her irritation growing with the sweat accumulating on her brow. Perhaps it was the heat of the climate that was setting her so on edge, making every one of her interactions with anyone from this clan feel like someone relentlessly scratching at the back of her neck – whether raising alarm for some unknown threat or simply confirming that she shouldn’t live in a place without the shade of trees, Clarke couldn’t say.

As she wandered around to the front of the building and out into the main square of the town, Clarke spotted a stone fountain several yards away in an otherwise empty square. She started towards it without even thinking, recalling a conversation she’d been roped into earlier, how some of the Riders’ officials had balked at her making light of Azgeda’s lack of wildlife in the attempt to open communication channels for trade. She’d known the moment she’d seen their reactions that the rest of this visit would be out of her control – that she’d just have to hope that Lexa was better at
speaking on Azgeda’s behalf than their own leader was.

Currently, the Commander was doing just that, sitting at the head of the long table at the front of the main room in the hall amongst the senior officials of their host clan. Clarke hadn’t missed the way the Commander’s eyes had locked onto her frame the moment she’d excused herself from the table, citing a headache as she departed from the hall without pausing for questions. Clarke tried not to think about Lexa sitting amongst all those old men, fending off accusations of complacency in Ice Nation schemes all whilst harboring that secret worry she kept so well-hidden as Clarke departed from her sight…

Regardless, Clarke couldn’t say she blamed the Riders’ hesitance to work with anyone from the Ice Nation, their history of open animosity towards each other at any clan gathering the source of deep-seated contempt that was, apparently, difficult to shake regardless of who was in charge. If only there was some sort of long-running diary that’d kept track of all the clans Nia had offended or attacked during her reign so that Clarke could know how many wrongs she’d have to right before her people could start living again – with just as many resources at their disposal as anyone else in the Coalition.

As it were, she figured it best to assume she was starting from scratch everywhere she went.

(It wouldn’t be the first time…)

Clarke stopped when her knees brushed the outside of the fountain, finally giving in and shrugging off her long coat. She draped it over the edge of the structure, bending to splash water over her bare forearms and not for the first time wishing her face wasn’t covered in paint that would surely be ruined if she did the same to it. Clarke scooped some water into her mouth, relishing in the coolness of every drop as it made its way down her throat.

She closed her eyes, forcing herself to take deep, calming breaths as the muffled sounds of nightlife drifted to her through still air. She could do this, she knew she could – all she had to do was keep the real mission in mind, keep those children at the forefront of her thoughts –

The sound of the gathering hall seemed to grow clear for a moment, and Clarke’s eyes fluttered open to find Wells lingering in the front doorway for a moment before spotting her. As soon as he did, her best friend started over towards the fountain as an easy smile began to spread across his features – a little slice of home making its way to her in even the most foreign of places.

“Mind if I join you?” he asked quietly, Clarke shaking her head immediately as he sat down beside her. Their legs automatically pressed against each other, the heel of his boot coming out to tap against hers in their small ritual that was as familiar to her as breathing.

She turned to look at him, warming at the serenity setting his features at ease as he looked at their surroundings.

“I get tired of it, too, you know,” Wells spoke up after a moment, looking at her through a sideways glance as her brows creased in question. “The politics.”

Clarke huffed a laugh, shrugging a little.

“It’s the small talk and fake smiles that bother me most, honestly, but I prefer that –,” she stated, pointing at the gathering hall for emphasis, “to war and famine. And, given my clan’s history with these people, I’ll take whatever I can get at this point.”

“Fair enough,” Wells shrugged in reply, fixing his gaze on the hall as he fidgeted with the cuff of his long coat. He fell silent for a spell, considering.
“Your clan, huh?”

The question caught Clarke slightly off-guard, directing her gaze over to her best friend who was looking at her with growing sorrow tempering the brightness of his eyes. She sighed, shaking her head a little as she looked to the ground beneath her feet.

“It’s strange, I know. Sometimes I forget, too – that I’m not… That I belong somewhere else now, I guess,” she admitted in barely more than a whisper, conscious of Wells’s gaze now glued to her profile. “That I belong to someone else – a whole bunch of someones, technically.”

Clarke forced the smallest of smiles as she turned to look at him, faltering at the sudden intensity of his gaze. Wells reached out to take her hands in his as he shook his head slowly, making sure she was paying attention as he began to speak.

“You don’t belong to anyone, Clarke. I sure as hell shouldn’t have to tell you that, though – I mean, come on,” he grinned crookedly, shouldering her in good humor as she felt her cheeks warm. “You’re the most self-sacrificing, stubbornly independent human I know. Gravity might actually reverse itself before anyone could even attempt to make you belong to them.”

Clarke chuckled quietly, squirming in her seat a little at the admiration she could feel in every word Wells spoke. He squeezed her hands in his a little tighter, forcing her to meet his gaze once more. Her breath caught in her throat at the wetness suddenly pooling in his eyes now, how he seemed to just sense how much pain she was harboring beneath every inch of her skin.

“You’ll always belong with me, though, Clarke – no matter how many clans you try to lead and/or join.” Clarke laughed through a rush of emotion as she leaned her head on his shoulder, feeling a swell of sentiment coursing through her as Wells squeezed her hands tighter.

“Thanks, Wells,” she whispered weakly, feeling so much warmth towards her oldest friend swelling within her chest that she felt it might burst right through to the surface.

Before either of them could really start to enjoy the solace of the other’s company, though, the front doors were being thrown open by none other than Raven, the girl mid-eye roll as she spotted Clarke and Wells.

“These people SUCK, guys! Seriously, who shoved a stick up their collective asshole –?”

“Shut up, Raven!!” Wells cut her off, shaking Clarke’s head off his shoulder as he motioned the mechanic over with clipped movements. “Keep your voice down!”

Raven huffed dramatically, making a show of sauntering over to the fountain as Clarke attempted to stifle laughter.

“You’d think they all somehow forgot how to, like…socialize with other humans out here on this glorified hay stack. I mean, I get it, they’re descendants of an ancient people or whatever that tall guy was saying but, like, aren’t we all?” Raven continued as she came to a stop in front of Clarke and Wells, hands on her hips as she stared the both of them down – as if they were somehow partially responsible for inconveniencing her.

“Hey, don’t look at me,” Clarke said, holding up both of her hands in symbolic surrender as she shook her head. “I can’t blame them for being suspicious of me, but I couldn’t even make it past the appetizers without almost starting a war, so.”

“Yeah, I mean what’s that all about?!” Raven responded in exasperation, making to flop down on the dirt as she forced her feet between Clarke’s and Wells’s boots. She leaned back on her hands,
shaking her head at the moon as she continued. “It’s not like you were the one who ordered those dudes to make their way all the way out here from the Ice Nation just to kill off a bunch of their cows all those years ago –,”

“Wait, seriously?” Wells interrupted her, sitting bolt upright in his bafflement. “We’re getting the secondary cold-shoulder for a bunch of dead cows?!”

“This is what I said!” Raven retorted, throwing up her hands in exclamation as Clarke burst out laughing. “They’re starting beef for the sake of…well, beef and, frankly, I’m offended that hospitality doesn’t rank higher on their list of priorities than fucking barbecue.”

The night grew louder with Clarke’s and Well’s joint laughter, Raven’s deadpan tone making everything that much more ridiculous. She continued to carry on with her dramatications of the Riders’ treatment towards them for minutes more, barely pausing for breath as Clarke and Wells could scarcely catch their own between fits of laughter.

When it seemed she’d had enough of her own griping on them, Raven made a somewhat abrupt shift into stories from the past year in Polis – moments that Clarke hadn’t been privy to, had simply thought she’d have to do without for the rest of her life. To her surprise and genuine elation, though, Raven dove into her memories to dig out the brightest of them all, the sparks of joy in the midst of ongoing pain, that made tears pool in Clarke’s eyes and brought the touch of a smile to Wells’s lips.

Stories of Anya’s various woes trying to keep Raven’s chaotic genius in check intermingled with tales of Bellamy’s and Wells’s training mishaps, the two men constantly competing for approval in various arenas all whilst maintaining an ongoing beard-growing competition. Maya and Thomas were at the forefront of a surprising number of incidents, as well, the two Mountain kids consistently putting themselves in need of saving by a member of Trikru who could make up for what their cultural knowledge lacked.

Although Clarke was becoming increasingly mindful of Raven’s steering away from anecdotes that might involve Lexa or anyone from the Ark, that wasn’t what was making her chest ache in the strangest way… It was the way that Octavia and Lincoln seemed to appear in the background every once and awhile, the constant reminder of love and strength exchanged interchangeably. Clarke couldn’t place her finger on it, but something about the way Raven spoke about the two of them made her heart dip into the pit of her stomach at every mention, a surge of some unknown emotion overtaking her every time. Perhaps it was the knowledge that she and Lexa could’ve been what Octavia and Lincoln were and so much more had fate not intervened, all that lost time weighing on her chest like a solid force pushing her downward towards a spiral she couldn’t entertain…

Regardless, Clarke didn’t care that her chest and side were aching or that her trade prospects with this clan were probably toast over some decades-old quarrel. She was happy – almost deliriously so – hearing even the smallest of details about some of the people she cared for most in this world. It was a bright sort of feeling from the tips of her fingers to the ends of her toes, and Clarke Griffin was happy. She wasn’t going to let anything spoil this moment – no matter how ephemeral it turned out to be...

“By the way, I snatched this off some guy’s plate on my way out,” Raven said after a while spent in comfortable silence, pulling a pastry from her jacket pocket and throwing it at Clarke who caught it one-handed. “Hope you like berry filling.”

Before Clarke could take a bite, though, the front doors to the gathering hall were bursting open across the square as people began streaming out one after the other. Raven seemed unbothered by it, though, flopping onto her back and staring up at the stars dusting the night sky as if nothing was happening behind her at all.
Wells immediately shot to his feet and went stiff as a board with his gaze glued to one of the emerging figures. As Clarke followed his gaze, she watched as none other than Lexa strode through the doors slightly ahead of the Plain Riders’ Chief, Bodaway, a towering man with a permanent scowl disfiguring his scarred face. Lexa’s eyes searched the scene in front of her as Chief Bodaway spoke quietly to her, expression utterly indiscernible until the moment she spotted Clarke, a flash of relief brightening her gaze as she started towards the fountain.

“Here we go again,” Raven grumbled, folding her arms behind her head as she started tapping the toe of Clarke’s boot with the sole of her own in a steady rhythm. Clarke barely noticed, though, eyes glued to Lexa’s every movement as green eyes mirrored her own, getting closer by the second.

To this day, the sight of the other girl still took Clarke’s breath away, her every fiber glued to Lexa like the moon to stars. Time always seemed to lose its steadiness in moments like this, its confines never sufficient enough to capture the two girls in its linearity –

“I do hope the fresh air has done you some good, my queen,” Bodaway greeted her in smooth English, interrupting her reverie as he and the Commander stopped a couple of feet from her. Anya, Echo, and a number of Plain Riders officials chattered quietly behind their leaders, watching and waiting for whatever commands might come next.

Upon Anya’s arrival, Raven threw a glance over her shoulder and smirked, springing to her feet and hopping to Clarke’s side opposite Wells, a more-than symbolic show of support on a number of fronts. A moment later, Clarke dipped her head in symbolic respect to the Chief, forcing a gentle smile over a tense jaw.

“I apologize for such a quick exit earlier – the journey has been long and somewhat unpleasant, as I’m sure you know.” Her tone was one of false pleasantries, doing her best to ignore the sudden quiet of Bodaway’s court as they switched from gossip to obvious eavesdropping. “Perhaps our re-examination of old arrangements can resume after a good night’s rest.”

The doors to the main hall swung open behind the small group once again to reveal a number of stragglers from the evening’s festivities. Abby, Maya, and Thomas lead the way, all engaged in what appeared to be light conversation along with a number of Plain Riders. Clarke didn’t know why the sight of them all looking so…normal made her stomach turn so.

“Perhaps,” Bodaway replied, the syllable clipped and accentuated by the skeptical lift of his brow. Clarke returned the look with an even sweeter smile, bowing her head once more as Bodaway ordered one of his advisors to show Clarke and company to their accommodations.

(Her friends had made it clear from the jump that they went where Clarke went, all-but forcing Chief Bodaway to provide them an entire cabin to themselves less than a quarter-mile away from the main square.)

As a kind-looking woman with deep wrinkles above bright eyes took Clarke’s hand and began directing her, Wells, Echo, and Raven toward their lodgings, Clarke threw one last glance over her shoulder, not missing the way Lexa’s eyes remained glued to her every movement as they made their way away from the fountain and down the sparsely torch-lit dirt path away from the square. That somber worry was banked in her expression once more, darkening her features as she watched Clarke recede from her sight.

The Commander and her Royal Guard were to be situated in cabins of their own in the very opposite direction of the Ice Queen’s, the arrangement clearly having been made with old clan dynamics in mind…
When Lexa became scarcely more than a dot in her vision, Clarke knew it was time to re-direct her
gaze forward, forced to ignore the screaming ache in her bones that told her to turn right back around
and sprint into her love’s arms away from the prying eyes in this strange new place…

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“I take back everything I said about them before – I think I’m gonna move here, right back into this
cabin, as soon as we finish with this rescue mission business,” Raven declared, spinning in place on
the hand-woven rug in the main room a couple times with a massive grin splitting her features.
“Who’s with me?”

“I can’t stand the smell of cow shit everywhere, so count me out,” Echo responded easily, shrugging
a little from where she sat sprawled on the brown leather sofa in the center of the room.

Wells chuckled from the kitchen area off to the right, voicing his agreement with Echo as he
rummaged through the wooden cabinets for a midnight snack. Clarke rolled her eyes from the
balcony overlooking the room as they all started listing their non-negotiables for a final settlement, so
to speak, looking around her with that same sense of awe that’d struck her when she’d first been
shown inside their lodgings.

She had to admit – Raven seemed to have the right idea.

After all, the cabin was unlike any accommodation Clarke had ever seen before, the décor all bright
colors, tan leathers, and handmade creations that screamed of a culture overflowing with ancient
traditions and ways of life. The main floor was one large room with a wood-covered kitchen area
tucked into the corner adjacent the couch Echo currently occupied. It was situated across from a large
fireplace that currently sat empty as warm summer air wafted in from a number of open windows to
the outside.

A wooden staircase led to what was more of an overlook than a second floor, only spanning half the
width of the room with three small cots arranged in the most space-conscious manner possible on the
loft. The only bathroom in the house was tucked away in a small corridor off the balcony, a large
stone tub calling Clarke’s name as her friends continued to carry on downstairs…

What felt like mere moments later, she found herself stripped of clothes as she bent to test the warmth
of the water, relishing in the opportunity for a bath as she lit a number of candles around the
bathroom. As she settled into the water, Clarke tried not to think of Lexa, off in some unknown cabin
somewhere in New Dakota surrounded by her Guard, with only Anya to keep her company as the
moon did its best to keep pace with all the stars in the sky…

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The next thing she became aware of was the sensation of fingers tracing along her forehead and
down her jawline, gentle as breeze to skin in their caress.
Clarke’s eyelids fluttered open as her mind remained in a sleep-induced haze, struggling to focus for a moment before settling on the source of the touch – the source of her comfort.

“Lexa,” she whispered through a dry mouth, leveling her gaze with the other girl who was sitting on the floor beside the tub, full uniform still in place despite her face being bare of paint.

The look in her eyes…

It was the epitome of serenity, the personification of bliss as Lexa met Clarke’s gaze with ease, continuing her loving ministrations as she memorized every detail of Clarke’s face. Just as she had earlier that night, Clarke marveled at how those eyes made her feel, how truly seen she felt deep within every part of herself.

It was moments like these that made Clarke feel whole again, loved.

“I did not mean to wake you, hodnes,” Lexa spoke softly, tracing her fingertips over Clarke’s lips and up the planes of Clarke’s face to loop a stray strand of blonde between them. “You were in such a restful peace, but I… I could not sleep without seeing you – without knowing you were truly safe here.”

A gentle smile stretched across Clarke’s lips as she reached up to catch Lexa’s hand in one of her own, bringing it back down to her lips as she began to kiss each of the worn knuckles on Lexa’s leather-gloved hand. Lexa’s eyes zeroed in on the movements, causing a wave to unfurl in Clarke’s stomach as black captured green and breath was sucked through parted lips.

“I’m always safer with you here, Lex,” Clarke whispered against Lexa’s fingertips, tugging lightly on the girl’s hand until she caught onto Clarke’s intentions.

Ever the willing worshipper, Lexa leaned forward eagerly, almost desperately capturing Clarke’s lips in a heady kiss that made heads spin and hearts lose their rhythms.

The swish of water and soft clang of metal on porcelain were the only sounds save racing heartbeats as the kiss deepened, Lexa’s hands almost instinctually knotting in Clarke’s messy braids. Clarke’s arms wrapped around Lexa’s neck, pulling her impossibly closer as she sat up further in the tub, uncaring of the water splashing every which way around her. The edge of the tub came up to Lexa’s ribcage where she extended on her knees to press further into Clarke, the outside of her uniform pressing against Clarke’s bare chest as she did so.

The position caused both of them to shudder, a wave of pure ecstasy coursing through each of their limbs in time to the other’s trembling as teeth met bottom lip, tongues fighting for dominance. It was not lost on Clarke that they’d still yet to make love since her return, but she just… She couldn’t – at least, not now, not here. She knew that such an act was a sacred thing to Lexa, and they just… couldn’t.

Not yet…

Everything about the kiss felt like something from a past life, a poignant callback to a time before falling mountains and the blood of queens; back to dances in moonlight to the gentle lilt of music from those long-dead, to the sound of her own voice lulling children to sleep as she read them stories filled with equal parts hope and fantasy, to souls cementing themselves inalterably together slowly at first but then all at once, love made on a bed of precious furs… It could’ve been a page pulled straight from the bindings of that chapter of Clarke’s life had it not been for the careful manner in which Lexa’s fingertips ghosted over the scars now permanently carved into Clarke’s back, the way she made sure not to get too close to the bandage on Clarke’s side.
The way her touch seemed to placate and heal while simultaneously grieving the suffering she’d been unable to prevent...

Feeling the pesky urge to breathe amidst all of the nostalgia-ridden passion that threatened to pull them both under, Clarke broke the kiss with a gasp, eyelids fluttering open as she watched Lexa’s do the same – only with a heart-achingly adorable sound of displeasure uttered between breaths. Barely a moment later, Lexa was leaning back in to reconnect their lips when Clarke noticed the white paint smeared on the girl’s cheekbone, moving to run her thumb over the smudge as a smile lifted the corners of her mouth.

At the confused pull of Lexa’s brow, Clarke’s smile grew further, closing the distance to press a sweet peck on parted lips before leaning back – much to Lexa’s dismay – and grabbing the washcloth she’d found in a stack of linens on the other side of the tub.

“Help me with my paint?” Clarke whispered, holding the cloth up for Lexa as the lines in the other girl’s forehead smoothed over, a soft yet brilliant smile brightening her face as she took the cloth and bent to wet it in the bath water.

“Close your eyes, hodnes,” Lexa nearly cooed, her voice impossibly soft as Clarke complied immediately, allowing herself to be fully supported by the other girl as Lexa began her gentle ministrations.

Mere moments later, Clarke found herself nearly lulled to sleep by the gentleness with which she was being treated, feeling a wave of powerful exhaustion overwhelming her as she swayed forward – as if all the nights spent restless in tents on changing land were just now registering with her mind and body the moment her soul reminded her of the burden. Lexa made up for where her own strength lacked, of course, supporting her easily as she tucked Clarke’s head into the crook of her neck. She continued her gentle cleaning with one hand as the other began combing through the mess of braids on the back of Clarke’s head, ever the skillful caretaker as she fell into the role as easily as breathing.

“Sleep now, ai Klark. All will be well when you wake...”

The next thing Clarke knew, she was falling back into that blissful weightlessness, anchored by the scent of lavender and earth, wrapped in a warmth that felt like home.

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“His son is his closest advisor and confidante,” Lexa spoke softly as they made their way along the dirt path, bathed in warm sunlight as they headed toward the central gathering hall. “Bodaway trusts him more than anyone, and he is often the first to be consulted when a decision must be made.”

Clarke nodded, glancing over at Lexa before following the girl’s pointed gaze to a group of Riders officials gathering near the stone fountain. The officials seemed to be the only members of the clan out and about at this hour, the temperature climbing by the minute in the scathing heat of high noon.

Chief Bodaway stood at the center of the group, towering above the rest with his long dark hair hanging loose over his shoulders, expression cool and unreadable. He wore the pelt of what looked to be some sort of large animal around his waist like a half-kilt, his chest, legs, and feet bare save for the fabric. Beside him stood a boy of his same height, dressed in similar fashion with his hair pulled back and away from his face.
Their features were strikingly similar – all dark eyes and protruding brow bones, lips set in hard lines despite the decades that separated them. Clarke didn’t need Lexa’s nod of confirmation to know that the boy was Bodaway’s son.

“His name is Hakan, and he’s only slightly more reasonable than his father,” Lexa continued even more quietly, her shoulder brushing Clarke’s as they stopped on the outskirts of the square.

Lexa signaled for her Royal Guard to proceed ahead of her, giving Anya the go-ahead to form the typical protective perimeter around the gathering hall where their meeting would take place.

The warrior complied immediately, muttering quiet commands to the Guard at Lexa’s back as she and Clarke remained in place. Echo stood at attention a couple of steps behind Clarke, giving her queen privacy as she scanned the scene before them, eyeing any potential weak spots along the perimeter.

Wells and Raven had stayed behind at the cabin, under orders from their Commander to find Abby and the rest of their group during the meeting of the clan leaders. The two of them had been tasked with putting together a more thorough presentation of the clues to the whereabouts of the missing children than the one Clarke and Lexa were about to give to Bodaway, both Queen and Commander desiring to remain one step ahead of anyone on their current list of suspects – which, if they were being honest with themselves, included just about every member of Lexa’s kingdom to the west of Polis at this point.

Clarke rolled her shoulders back out of nervous habit, grateful to her past self for having packed the sleeveless leather armor she’d had dyed the dark blue of her clan a couple months prior. She wore only a black sleeveless tunic beneath the leather armor and a pair of tight black pants to match her boots in what was, apparently, the most heat-friendly version of her official uniform she could find.

Her weapons belt hung securely off her hips, her hair hanging loose over her shoulders save the two thin braids that wove around the crown of her head and tied in the back, courtesy of Lexa’s skillful handiwork.

(As it were, the Commander barely had time to braid her own hair this morning, having had to slip away just before sunrise to avoid being spotted emerging from the Ice Queen’s quarters in broad daylight. She and Clarke had shared one of the cots in the upstairs loft, Lexa having dressed Clarke in her night tunic and fallen asleep in full uniform to avoid leaving in search of her own sleep cloths and risk waking Echo, Raven, and Wells – all of whom had fallen asleep in various positions on the couch and chairs in the downstairs living room.)

Clarke glanced over at Lexa once more, trying not to be too obvious in her admiration of Lexa’s bare and tattooed arms as she, too, had opted for the least amount of clothing her position would allow on this particular occasion, her own hair loosely braided and cascading over her shoulders where it framed her painted face.

“Hakan is the key to all of this,” Lexa continued after a moment, meeting Clarke’s gaze on her with soft eyes, serious yet serene as she studied her love’s face. “He is too young to remember the crimes of those who came before you, and I have it on good authority that he is far more of a visionary than his father would care to admit – the kind of visionary that would be in favor of new alliances with old foes.”

“I can work with that,” Clarke murmured, the smallest of grins lifting a corner of her mouth as she looked towards the boy next to Bodaway, studying the forced rigidity of his posture as his gaze remained glued to his father. “But what about Bodaway? I mean, you saw the way he responded to me yesterday. He seems to have taken the whole former-second-to-his-mortal-enemy thing far too seriously. I might as well be her for all he cares…”
Lexa’s jaw tightened in Clarke’s periphery at that, a flash of brutal darkness crossing her features at the mention of the woman who’d nearly taken everything from her. The reaction was quelled immediately, though, her gaze glued to Clarke’s profile with searing intensity.

“You are not her, Clarke – not now, not ever.” Clarke met Lexa’s gaze once again, swallowing the lump forming in her throat as she took in all of the raw passion burning in forests of green. “Should he choose to go against one who has sworn an oath of fealty to his Commander and test the sanctity of my word, he shall see where my true loyalty lies…”

I swear fealty to you, Klark Kom Skaikru. I vow to treat your needs as my own, and your people as my people…

Clarke could only nod, struggling immensely to find any words that would suffice as they continued to stare into each other’s eyes, probing hearts, minds, and souls –

“Chief Bodaway awaits you, Heda,” Anya’s quiet voice cut in, the warrior stepping into view with a hard set to her lips.

Both Queen and Commander fixed their gaze on the warrior now, Queen yielding to Commander as the leader nodded, raising her chin the slightest bit and giving the signal for Anya to fall into rank by her side. Clarke threw a glance at Echo and did the same, the two of them filing in behind the Commander and her general as they started towards the fountain.

Barely more than halfway there, Clarke was struck by an idea…

“Good morning, Commander, General – I trust you slept well,” Bodaway greeted them, pointedly leaving out any sort of address to the two Azgeda women trailing slightly behind. Clarke simply fixed her gaze on Hakan, letting the fakest of smiles lift the corners of her mouth upwards as the boy looked between Commander and Queen.

“Very.” the Commander replied evenly, her hands clasping with ease behind her back as Anya stood at attention. “Your hospitality has been much appreciated… Are all present who you desire to be in attendance for our meeting?”

Bodaway nodded immediately, gesturing broadly to the four advisors flanking him and Hakan. Lexa nodded once in response, starting towards the gathering hall with Anya by her side.

Clarke saw her opportunity in that moment, gesturing for Echo to hold back as she spoke up.

“The Commander has informed me that my presence is no longer needed this morning, as she has all the information I do on the current…predicament at hand.”

All heads turned to gawk at her as she spoke, Lexa the least obvious of them all, the slight dimple in her forehead the only indication that she was even remotely concerned by Clarke’s outburst.

Bodaway narrowed his eyes at her, immediately wary of this new queen who seemed hell-bent on avoiding his presence at all cost.

“Besides, I’ve been incredibly fascinated by the layout of your capitol, and I would love to have an insider’s opinion on how and where best to establish trading posts to and from which my merchants can go – the Chief second’s, perhaps?” Clarke asked, raising a brow at Hakan as the boy gulped.

The effect of her words was instant, all manner of reactions from shock to pure confusion in full display on the faces of the leaders before her. Lexa was already ten steps ahead of them, though, a flash of pride lighting her features as she caught on to Clarke’s not-so-subtle plan.
Bodaway stepped towards Clarke, jaw clenching as he shook his head.

“I think that would be incredibly inappropriate given our scheduled meeting with the Commander –,”

“On the contrary, it was my idea,” Lexa interrupted him, immediately coming to Clarke’s aid as she faced Bodaway, expression giving nothing away. “As we discussed last night, Chief, I believe it would be incredibly beneficial to both the Plain Riders and Azgeda if trade was reopened between your clans. They are desperately in need of livestock, and your mineral repositories could use supplementation, if I’m not mistaken.”

Clarke simply quirked a brow at Hakan, refusing to break her gaze on the boy as Lexa worked her magic on Bodaway. The Chief, for his part, was now looking between Commander and Queen as though trying to determine the missing thread connecting the two women together.

Before he could do so, though, Hakan stepped forward, steel overtaking his gaze as he inclined his head in respect to the Commander.

“I will show Queen Clarke to our outposts, Heda,” Hakan stated, nodding towards Clarke and grazing his father’s shoulder as he made his way over to her. She smiled at him as he came to stand beside her, shuffling awkwardly as he refused to meet his father’s incredulous stare on his back.

“It’s settled, then – shall we?” Lexa started towards the gathering hall without pausing for further questions, forcing all those around her to follow suit despite their lingering expressions of bafflement.

Bodaway was last to comply, eyes zeroing in on Clarke and his son as the two of them turned on their heels with Echo at their flank.

Clarke simply ignored him, though, trying not to smile too obviously to herself as she threw one last glance over her shoulder at Lexa. Time seemed to slow to a halt for a moment as the action drew Lexa’s eyes up and over to hers, some force like magnets pulling their gazes together for the briefest of seconds – long enough for Clarke to glean all manner of apprehension Lexa carried beneath the loving surface of her eyes to watch Clarke departing from her once again…

She watched as the Commander disappeared into the hall surrounded by diplomats and flanked by guards, the weight of conveying the gravity of a mystery alluding all clans now resting solely on her shoulders – as all burdens often seemed to fall these days. Clarke told herself that she couldn’t focus on that now, though, too overwhelmed by the fact that her bullshit plan to force a relationship between her clan and the Riders was coming to fruition – not without Lexa’s help, of course.

Am I being selfish letting Lexa go it alone back there? I am, aren’t I?

Clarkemight be selfish, but the Queen of Azgeda is doing right by her clan in taking advantage of an opportunity for expanding trade in an area so desperately needed. That duty must come first, just as the Commander’s must now…

She wondered how long she’d have to tell herself this before she believed it, before she could actually start to separate her own actions from those of Queen Clarke of Azgeda – from the warrior with enough blood on her hands to soak the soil of valleys and turn scarlet the rushing water of rivers…
“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Clarke admitted in awe, rubbing the palm of her hand down the bottom half of the elaborate carving protruding from the ground at the peak of a gently-sloping hill. She crouched down near its base, studying the ancient designs so beautifully painted in the likeness of various animals that seemed to cover half the distance to the clouds. “You said it was called a – what, now?”

“A totem pole,” Hakan answered easily, squinting up towards the top of the carving with a hand on his hip. “No one knows how or why it survived the bombings that ended whatever society came before this one, but father thinks it’s the same reason why our land has always yielded such bountiful harvests.”

“And why’s that?” Clarke asked him, straightening back up and raising a brow at the boy who towered over her with only half the confidence to match his height.

Echo was only a short distance away from them, making notes of the hill’s vantage points so as to find the best spot to establish an outpost.

“I’m sure you’ve heard at this point,” he shrugged, shaking his head a little as though he was growing tired of answering such questions. “Our people are the ‘chosen ones’ – whatever the hell that means…”

Clarke was sure that last part was supposed to have been inaudible to her by the way Hakan’s cheeks reddened as soon as the words left his mouth. As it were, he simply grimaced, immediately fixing his gaze on the grass beneath his bare feet as she stepped closer to him.

“Chosen to do what, exactly?” Hakan shook his head as he sighed, clearly beating himself up for letting slip his skepticism at whatever ideal had been pre-destined for him to buy into.

“I…I shouldn’t have said anything. We sh-should keep going,” he said, turning on his heels and heading back down the hill they’d jogged up to get to the totem pole just beyond the western perimeter of New Dakota.

Clarke jogged after him, throwing Echo an exasperated look as she caught him by the shoulder, fixing him with a stern look as he cringed away from her. She wasn’t letting him get away that easily…

“Look, to be frank, your people have been nothing short of hostile to me and my advisor since the moment we entered your capitol… And I get it – my predecessor and her ilk did more than a few bad deeds to offend everyone north, south, east, and west of our border. But if your underwhelming hospitality is about something more than that – something bigger – then I’m gonna need you to fill me in right now… If not for me, then for the sake of the Coalition created by a Commander who I know for a fact your clan owes their lives to quite a few times over.”

Hakan’s mouth was set in a hard line now, looking at Clarke as though she’d been sent to ruin his every waking moment, but she stood unyielding, refusing to let him get away without answering.

“It’s not…,” Hakan shook his head, cutting himself off as he looked out over the pastures of green and the skies of blue extending off in every direction from their position on the hill. “It has nothing to do with you, specifically – or any other clan in the Coalition, for that matter… It’s more of a commandment, let’s say, that’s been passed from chieftain to chieftain for generations – even before the bombings.”

Clarke’s eyes remained glued to his face as a gust of wind tousled their hair about, unrelenting even as the boy seemed to shrivel beneath the intensity of her stare. Echo was closer now, standing mere
feet from them as Hakan spoke.

“Our people have existed on these lands for hundreds – maybe even thousands – of years. We were a tribe then where now we are a clan, but our belief system remains the same no matter what we’re called or who is leading us… We are the First People, the Nomads, and we believe we share blood with some of the first human beings to ever evolve on this planet. We have survived turn of century after turn of century, civilization after civilization, as it is our duty to survive – to be the First and the Last.”

Hakan gave no warning before flopping down onto the grassy hillside, pulling his knees to his chest as he gestured for Clarke to join him. She did so immediately, signaling for Echo to do the same as her eyes never once left Hakan’s face.

“We believe our people will be the last survivors on this Earth just as we were the first to begin surviving. That is our destiny – that is what we, as a people, have been chosen to do. Anything – or anyone – that gets in the way of that prerogative is and forever will be known as the enemy of our people, a sworn foe who can never be redeemed in the eyes of those who lead us… So, you see, it’s not really you, yourself, that is the problem – it’s the fact that you now bear the title of the one who cemented every member of your clan as sworn foes to my people for the rest of eternity.”

Clarke was staring at him in utter bewilderment now, struck speechless for the first time in a while as she attempted to process the most unexpected response she’d gotten from another human in quite some time. Hakan glanced sideways at her and grimaced again, awkwardly rubbing at his jaw before moving to tug a handful of grass from the earth. Echo looked beyond annoyed.

“No amount of coaxing from the Commander or reminders of the Coalition’s requirements for compliance with diplomatic referendums is going to convince my father and the elders to strike up any kind of relationship with a sworn foe – outstanding crisis or not.”

Clarke could only gaze in front of her at that, scanning the quiet capitol from their spot just far enough up and away to get the full picture – and then some… The wheels in her brain were clicking into place a lot slower than they normally would what with the overload of information she’d just been given, but she eventually connected the dots necessary to make her voice work again.

“Which means this entire visit is pointless, then, doesn’t it,” Clarke concluded, shaking her head as Hakan fixed his gaze on her from the periphery. “Your people are no more willing to help in our search for the missing kids than they are to strike up a trade deal with my clan, are they?”

She met Hakan’s stare then, watching as he pursed his lips and hung his head – the picture of defeat. Clarke could only nod, feeling a wave of something like weariness settling deep within her bones all of a sudden.

“Why even send word that any of your people went missing at all, then? On top of that, why would your father request a consultation with the Commander on various matters of trade if you’re not willing to trade with the one clan that has what you’re lacking?” Clarke asked, doing her best to contain the growing agitation in her tone as Hakan seemed to cringe even more deeply within himself.

After minutes spent in silence without answer, Clarke simply shook her head, letting it fall into her hands as that warm breeze continued to move their hair all around.

We came all this way for nothing – no leads, no assistance, and almost certainly no newfound trading relations… We’re no closer to finding any of those kids now than we are to getting my people adequately fed.
“What’s even the point of all this showmanship, then? If for nothing else, why?”

“He didn’t send them,” Hakan finally spoke up, voice barely more than a whisper above the wind as his words forced Clarke’s head back up, brows furrowing. “The messages to Polis, I mean – I did.”

Clarke could only stare at him, narrowing her eyes as he continued.

“Our mills are falling apart because the material used to keep the foundations standing has weathered away to almost nothing over the years. Our tools have been worn down to the point where they’re barely more useful than needles to those who seek to use them. Our water is growing toxic from a lack of proper filtration to keep centuries of radiation and pollution from contaminating the only source we have. On top of all that, our kids are going missing without cause or explanation – gone without a trace…”

Hakan clenched his fists together over his knees, clearly suppressing a number of strong emotions as Clarke continued to stare at him.

“Chosen ones be damned – we need help, Queen Clarke, and my father is too stubborn an ass to admit it. Which is why I’ve been the one pulling the strings this entire visit, in case you haven’t noticed…” Clarke sighed, looking away from him and back down over New Dakota as the wheels of her mind turned once more.

What did he expect her to do, violate the terms of the Coalition and help him unseat his own father from the position of chieftain? Command what little army the Plain Riders possessed to march with them in search of the children despite having promised every other clan they’d visited that no physical sacrifice would be required so long as they forfeited all information over to their Commander? Carry her own plan out to literal fruition and force some kind of trading relationship upon the Riders despite her clan having cemented themselves as eternal foes, or whatever the hell Hakan had said?

What was she supposed to do?

As she let the wind take over where her voice should’ve been, Clarke caught a glimpse of Wells and Raven emerging from their cabin on the eastern side of the village, barely more than dots for how far away they were. She let her eyes drift over to the gathering hall, feeling a powerful urge to march back down there, retrieve Lexa from inside, and steal her away to some hidden place where neither of them would ever have to deal with any of this shit again –

“What the –?”

Clarke’s eyes snapped over the Hakan in that moment, drawn by the alarm taking over his voice. She heard Echo gasp beside him, as well, following their line of sight to a hill on the other side of the capitol’s perimeter, directly opposite the one they were sitting on.

Clarke’s heart nearly stopped the moment she saw it.

A figure, dressed in black from head-to-toe, standing atop the hill overlooking the city – just like the one that’d killed that woman in the forest and taken her child. It stood still as a statue, faceless and indiscernible, it’s outline causing a brutal interruption in the colors of the horizon.

“Clarke, do you see –?”

“Yeah,” Clarke cut Echo off, slowly rising to her feet as Hakan and Echo did the same beside her. “That’s it – that’s the one who kidnapped the kid. The one who shot that woman…”
Before Clarke could even think about what her next step should be, Hakan was charging left, clearly making for the figure along the outer perimeter line created by the sloping hillsides.

“No!” Clarke yelled, sprinting left and pivoting in front of him, holding her hands out to stop his advance as he looked at her incredulously. “If this is the same person I think it is, they’ve got a gun, and you’re sure as hell not going to be doing anyone any favors by running at them and getting yourself shot, alright?”

Hakan visibly bristled, looking from Clarke to the figure who remained alarmingly still atop the hill.

“Go get your father and the Commander – tell her what I told you, and bring back-up! Run!!” With one last furious glance at the lone figure, Hakan nodded, side-stepping Clarke and taking off like a shot down the hill towards New Dakota and the gathering hall.

_Tell her I might have to break my promise again_…

“What do they want?” Echo asked quietly, coming to stand beside Clarke as the two of them stared the figure down. Clarke could only shake her head, hand flexing on the grip of her sword as she tried to make out something, anything, that might give her an idea as to why the kidnapper was here – who they wanted to take...

For all the commotion they were making, the figure remained completely still, staring pointedly in a direction that Clarke couldn’t make out somewhere in the village.

“We won’t be able to cut the kidnapper off if they decide to charge at someone in the capitol, and I’m almost positive they’ll be able to see us coming no matter which way we decide to run at them,” Clarke stated, shaking her head a little as Echo shifted uneasily, all nervously banked energy.

“So, what do we do?” Echo asked, tone clipped and uneasy. “I’m sure as hell not letting you attack by yourself knowing they have a gun…” Clarke shook her head more firmly this time, glancing at Echo as steely determination overtook her expression.

“We go with Option C,” Clarke concluded, reaching around Echo’s back for the half-sized bow she always kept hidden beneath her armor there. Echo caught on immediately, shaking the small pack of arrows from her shoulders as Clarke planted her feet into the hillside, readying the bow. Echo notched an arrow a few seconds later as Clarke steadied her aim, quietly measuring the distance from their position across the capitol to the kidnapper’s overlook on the other side.

It was a snowball’s chance in hell that Clarke was going to hit the kidnapper anywhere on their person, but that wasn’t what Clarke was aiming for...

“Spirit of the Commanders guide my hand,” Clarke whispered only somewhat ironically, pulling the bowstring back to her shoulder and closing one eye as she let the arrow fly.

It soared through the air in the exact arc she thought it would, seeming to almost still the wind as it went. What felt like hours more than seconds later, the arrow finally buried itself in the hillside a couple of feet down and in front of the kidnapper – just as Clarke had intended, to get their attention off of whatever or whoever the hell they were staring at in the village below.

The next moment, Clarke and Echo watched as the kidnapper turned with a slowness that sent chills down Clarke’s spine towards the two Azgeda women.

Before either of them could determine what to do next, though, they heard a great commotion from
down in the capitol – the sound of multiple pairs of footsteps stomping the earth at a run as shouted orders rang out into the afternoon air. Clarke looked in time to see Hakan running just ahead of Bodaway and Anya, the three of them trailing behind Lexa who had apparently overtaken them from the jump. A group of Plain Rider soldiers trailed their Chief, poised for whatever battle awaited them.

Clarke’s heart thudded unevenly in her chest as she watched the Commander sprinting through New Dakota, her eyes finally locking on to Clarke standing on the hill in an expression that was unreadable from such a distance –

“They’re getting away!!” Echo cried, shaking Clarke’s arm and pointing. Clarke looked up just in time to watch the figure disappear behind the hill, grunting in frustration as she took off in the leftward arc Hakan had wanted to go in earlier.

She and Echo were now running full-tilt down one hill and up another, going at a perpendicular angle to the Commander who was bound to head them off any moment now.

Sure enough, within seconds, Lexa had caught up to them, falling in beside Clarke as they shared a look of relief to be reunited again, Lexa’s hand squeezing Clarke’s mid-sprint.

“It’s grassy hills for miles – they won’t have anywhere to hide this time!” Clarke shouted over the rushing of wind as it whipped in every direction around them while they ran.

They were nearly to the other side of the capitol’s perimeter when Hakan, Bodaway, Anya, and the Riders finally caught up, the group of them now approaching the hill’s peak like an impending stampede.

“Do not aim to kill! Capture is top our priority!” Lexa shouted in Trigedasleng to those behind her, pulling her hunting knife from her weapons belt and holding it at the ready as they crowned the hill.

Clarke and Lexa stopped at the same time, causing the rest of their party to halt, as well, as they surveyed the land. Just as Clarke had said, there was nothing but grass for miles, yet still no black-clad figure to be found –

“There!!” Hakan yelled, sprinting past them towards the grassy flat beyond the next hill over where the figure stood completely still, watching them.

Clarke remained glued to the hilltop, feeling as if the rest of their group was running past her in slow motion as a heaviness seemed to settle in her stomach.

“Clarke? Clarke, what’s wrong?” Lexa practically shouted in alarm, grabbing on to Clarke’s arm. Anya and Echo stopped abruptly upon seeing their Commander and Queen staying behind as the Plain Riders ran ahead, expressions utterly baffled. “What is it?”

Why show yourself in broad daylight when you know you’re being hunted? Why play cat-and-mouse when you’re grossly outnumbered –?

“It’s a trap,” Clarke whispered, meeting Lexa’s wide-eyed gaze with panic suddenly lighting her own. “Lexa, it’s a trap!! We’ve got to stop –,”

Out of nowhere, the brutal sound of bullets being loosed from high-capacity shells lit up the afternoon air, the barrage meeting human flesh to the tune of blood-curdling screams.

The next moment, Clarke was on the ground, having been tackled back and behind the hill by Lexa who laid her body on top of Clarke’s, pinning her to the grass on the slope of the hill away from the machine gun fire. Anya and Echo threw themselves down next to their respective leaders, hands gripping the hilts of their weapons with blood-drained faces as the four of them were forced to listen
to the sounds of a massacre.

Clarke buried her head in the grass, doing her best to catch her breath as Lexa did the same on top of her, pressing herself as close to Clarke as possible.

They’d been led like pigs to slaughter into a trap that’d most likely claimed the lives of the most powerful descendants of Earth’s oldest living people by now.

And all they could do was lay low on a hillside and hope that they wouldn’t be next.

Chapter End Notes

So, if you couldn't already tell, my head-canon is that the Plain Riders are Native American - or, at least, descendants of Native Americans who have maintained many aspects of their culture that they were able to more fully cultivate in the wake of ~modern US civilization~ coming to an end.

This was my attempt at a little more world-building that was more character-driven than anything else - which is pretty much how all aspects of my stories are if you haven't noticed lmao. We're also getting a lot closer to a reveal of the Grounders' back story and the history of this particular universe, as well as how the Commanders came to be - which does not, in any way, shape, or form, involve the show's fucking AI Flame thing lmao.

I'd love to hear your thoughts below if you're so inclined to share them with me!. As always, thank you to anyone who's taken the time to read this story at any point - it truly means the world to me that even one person decided to stick around in the first place. Everything since has just been icing on top of the cake <3

Hope to see y'all back for the next one!!
The Essence of Time

Chapter Summary

Recap:
Upon their arrival to New Dakota, Clarke, Lexa and their companions were amazed to find such a rich and fascinating culture awaiting them in the faraway clan of the Plain Riders. Soon, though, old political tensions reared their ugly heads and tainted the visit with strain, leaving little chance of a diplomatic future between Azgeda and the Riders. All politics were immediately forgotten the moment a familiar black-clad figure appeared on the perimeter of New Dakota, luring Clarke, Lexa, Anya, Echo and a number of Plain Riders into the hills - unaware of the impending slaughter that awaited them...

Chapter Notes

....um, hi.

I really don't have anything to say for myself other than that 2018 was a hard ass year for me - and many others - and I needed to put my focus elsewhere. As much as I missed this story (and writing, in general), I knew I needed to put it on the shelf until I could get my shit together lmao. Otherwise, the chapter wouldn't have turned out the way I'd initially envisioned it to.

That being said, though, to those who are still interested in reading this story: thank you. I sincerely appreciate any comment that's been left in my absence - they helped me put words on the page and a smile on my face. Thank you thank you thank you.

(tw for the chapter: somewhat graphic descriptions of gun-related injuries.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The world had gone silent.

Even Clarke’s own heartbeat had quieted to an anxious hum as she dared more than breathe while Lexa remained on top of her.

How many minutes had passed? Had it even been minutes?

Clarke felt like the four of them were completely unattached to the linear timeline, waiting for something, anything, to jolt them back to reality – back to a time in which they weren’t waiting to live or die young.
It felt like a metaphor for a much larger circumstance, if Clarke was being completely honest with herself –

“You are far too exposed like this, Heda,” Anya spoke up suddenly, voice barely more than the breath of a whisper as Lexa grew completely still atop Clarke. “We need to get you to safety – the Coalition cannot afford to lose you, and neither can I.”

Had Clarke not been pressed for breath with no choice but to look at anything other than dirt, she might’ve been able to savor the surprised flash of emotion she knew was crossing Lexa’s features right about now - as taken aback by Anya’s unusually public display of affection as the warrior, herself.

“I will not leave my people to be slaughtered like sheep in a pen,” Lexa responded just as quietly after collecting herself, steel firming her voice as she squeezed Clarke’s left wrist almost unconsciously where her hand had it pinned to the grass. “We have no idea what’s happening over this hill, nor where the enemy has currently positioned itself – nor, for that matter, how many of them have weapons trained on that flat. Without eyes on the landscape, we cannot even consider our next move –,”

“I’ll go,” Echo interrupted with clipped finality, fidgeting restlessly next to Clarke as though her next move had been decided long before she’d spoken up. “Last time I checked, I was the spy here – let me be your eyes, Heda.”

Despite how her stomach lurched at the thought of Echo going it alone on the hills with an unknown enemy lurking god-knows-where, Clarke knew it was the only move they could make at this point what with their hapless positioning out in broad daylight. Plus, Echo hadn’t exactly asked her queen’s permission before going above her head…

She felt more than saw Lexa nod once before speaking.

“Stay low – do not engage the enemy unless you absolutely have to –,”

“And please, for the love of god, be careful,” Clarke finished, moving her hand from beneath Lexa’s grasp to reach out and squeeze Echo’s.

Echo returned the gesture in kind, moving to action not a moment later as the warmth of her body disappeared from Clarke’s side in total and complete silence.
Once again, Clarke felt time do that strange skipping thing, lurching backwards and forwards as it attempted to accommodate the threatening permanence of that moment –

Suddenly, a chorus of shouts and yelled commands sounded from somewhere behind them in New Dakota, growing closer by the second. With a painful thud deep in her chest, Clarke realized that the loudest of the voices was Wells, rousing a number of Trikru and Plain Riders warriors to action as they headed in the direction of the gunfire – the direction of their Commander.

What felt like mere seconds later, Wells’s shout sounded above the rest, nearly at their backs now:

“We have your flank, Heda!! You’re clear!! ”

Lexa was off Clarke and on her feet in the next second, reaching out a hand to help her love as Anya moved in front of Commander and Queen, ready to lay down her life at a moment’s notice.

Clarke spun around to meet Lexa’s frantic gaze for a moment, reaching out with both hands to grasp onto the muscles just below Lexa’s shoulders as both pairs of eyes wildly scanned the other’s face despite knowing full well that they were both safe. They seemed to breathe the same sigh of relief in the next moment, eyes screaming every loving sentiment known to man between them as they became surrounded by shouting warriors.

It was the Commander and Queen who turned to face Wells as he finally reached the two of them, gasping for breath beneath wide eyes as he scanned the two of them for injury. Lexa turned to shout orders at her gathering warriors in the next moment, commanding that they split into two groups and create a perimeter around the flat in preparation to swarm.

“Raven and Abby are preparing the gathering hall for any wounded left alive. We came as soon as we heard the gunshots,” Wells panted between breaths, looking utterly torn up as he looked between Clarke and Lexa.

Clarke reached out to place a consoling hand on his shoulder, sympathy lighting her gaze.

“You did the right thing – none of us could have known this would happen here.”

Noticing a break in the ranks running to Clarke’s left, she gestured for Wells to follow her as she fell in with the warriors almost instinctively, moving quickly to help form the western barrier. She scanned every face she came across, searching anxiously for Echo as her warrior was still nowhere in sight, never having given them the all-clear to charge –

“Clarke!!” Lexa shouted from behind her, causing Clarke to stop in her tracks and side-step a warrior to avoid being mowed down as she turned back to look for the girl.
Lexa was clearing a path down the middle of her running warriors, hurrying to catch up to Clarke with fierce protectiveness burning through the intensity of her gaze, eyes trained on her love attempting to disappear from her sight once again. She caught up to Clarke only seconds later, grasping onto the girl’s forearms and scanning Clarke’s face for any sign of sudden madness.

“What on earth are you –?”

“We can’t be standing right next to each other when we have no idea who or where the enemy is,” Clarke cut her off, voice firm as Lexa was already shaking her head. “If they’ve done their due diligence – which, judging by the targeted slaughter they just carried out, it would appear they have – then they’ll probably know who the leaders of the Coalition are, which means they have every reason to take us both out while they have the chance… We can’t give them one, Lex.”

Clarke could clearly see that Lexa knew she was right – that all valuable personnel needed to make themselves as implacable in the crowd as anyone else running straight into the melee – but she watched as the girl visibly warred with logic before her eyes, squeezing Clarke’s arms tighter as she pursed her lips. She hated how often she had to start this war within Lexa’s mind – how easy it was to force the girl’s heart to war with her head so viscerally – but she’d scarcely been allowed another choice since she’d met Lexa.

“I’ll protect her, Commander,” Wells spoke up suddenly, causing both leaders to look to him as his expression steeled confidently.

Lexa looked from him to Clarke, lips forming a hard line in an embattled expression before she finally shook her head and sighed, hanging her head in utter defeat as she dropped her arms back down to her sides. The dichotomy between Lexa’s posture of utter resignation and the blood-hungry movements of her warriors rushing past on either side struck a tragic picture, sending a wave of pure heartache washing over Clarke with almost staggering force.

Lexa looked back up in the next moment, looking as though she’d aged decades in seconds as her eyes spoke of ancient weariness, a feeling she was all too accustomed to living in as she stared at Wells.

“With your life,” she commanded low and unquestionable, re-establishing her mask of authority between one blink and the next as Wells nodded immediately, vigorously.

Clarke met Lexa’s gaze in a moment of raw intensity, the whole world seeming to quiet down as they passed silent messages between them –

“Heda!!” Anya shouted from behind Lexa, spurring the Commander to action as she turned on her heels to run towards the eastern border, meeting her general along the way.

Lexa threw one last glance over her shoulder at Clarke, eyebrows furrowed with what appeared to
be a flash of panic before facing forward and disappearing into the horde.

“Over there!” Wells cried, snapping Clarke’s attention to him as he took off in a leftward beeline perpendicular to those forming the eastern perimeter.

Before Clarke could even think to ask him what he’d seen, she spotted a lone Echo, crouching behind the peak of a hill with her bow at the ready. The two of them jogged over to her, crouching down beside her as she barely more than acknowledged their presence.

Clarke followed her line of sight to see a perfect view of the clearing, bodies sprawled in puddles of blood as warriors began streaming around them, encircling the wounded in protective stances - apparently having been ordered to swarm. Clarke looked to the crest between two hills that acted as the entrance to the clearing, her heart thundering destructively in her chest as she spotted Lexa surveying her warriors with Anya and the rest of the Royal Guard beside her, poised to dive in front of bullets for their Commander if necessary.

Lexa looked as calm as ever, scanning the thin streams of warriors as if searching for a face –

*CRACK!*

The sound of a lone bullet tore through the cacophony, sending the scene in front of Clarke into a disarray as Wells threw himself on top of her. She resisted the crush of his weight on instinct, eyes still glued to Lexa - apparently unharmed - who’d immediately been surrounded by loyal and armoured bodies as weapons clicked and readied across the clearing.

Nearly every warrior in sight was checking their bodies and those of the people around them for signs of an entry wound, tense and confounded as more and more searches came up nill second after second.

“*Here!!*” someone cried near the center of the clearing after a moment, motioning wildly for assistance as Clarke’s eyes locked onto two warriors crouching over a limp body in the dirt.

With a chill of utter dread down Clarke’s spine, she recognized the sole of the boots on the victim’s feet, marked by ceremonial carvings and ancient symbols that adorned only the most formal of garments for this clan’s leader. Several warriors were now towering over the Chief, throwing stricken and pained looks from person to person as none of them appeared to know what to do.

“It was a finishing shot,” Echo spoke up quietly, tone resigned as Wells moved from his position shielding Clarke to put the two women next to each other. Echo looked to Clarke then, jaw tight as she shook her head bleakly.
“Whoever that shooter was, he knew exactly who he came here to kill - and how, for that matter, he’d manage to lure them out.”

The three of them sat with that for stretching moments more, watching as the warriors below were slow to move back to action - hoping that was the last of it, waiting to be proven wrong. The growing chorus of agony from the wounded served as a sobering score to the pace of it all.

“Like I said before - this shooter was the same man who kidnapped that child on the road,” Clarke stated after what felt like hours of holding her breath, staring blankly ahead at the resuming scene before her as Echo and Wells watched her. “Maybe there are a bunch of them working together on the kidnappings, but this was the same guy - same gun, too. The rounds sounded the same.”

Before either of her friends could question her assertion, though, Clarke was up and on her feet, feeling her healer instincts kicking in as she made her way toward the clearing at a run, Echo and Wells struggling to keep up. Ever the loyal aide, though, Echo assumed a protective flank with her weapon at the ready as Wells followed suit, the three of them making a beeline towards Chief Bodaway.

“Stand aside! Move!!” Clarke commanded as she came upon the small group of warriors still crowding the body. They responded immediately to the sound of her voice, making way for her to approach as she threw herself on the ground beside the Chief, her knees instantly soaking in his blood.

Upon a cursory glance, Clarke immediately knew the man was done for; three bullet holes made a pattern of his chest as they oozed scarlet liquid, a fourth - the finishing shot - having torn open the point where shoulder met neck. Wells already had his hands on two of the holes in Bodaway’s chest, eyes resigned in banked tragedy as he came to much the same conclusion as Clarke.

She took one of the Chief’s hands lying limply by his side, placing her other hand on the wound in his neck as his fogging eyes wandered over to the sudden pressure in his palm. His dark eyes searched aimlessly for her face as she leaned over him, doing as much as she could to ease him in such a state.

Bodaway’s eyes found hers after a breath, the light at the center of his pupils more like a flickering candle as he drew ragged air into his damaged lungs.

“M-my son,” he choked out, droplets of red speckling his lips as he did so. “W-where is m-my son…?”

“He’s just fine - I can see him now,” Clarke lied instantly, smoothly, daring one of the warriors around her to so much as breathe in a contradictory way. She smiled softly at the Chief and squeezed his hand tightly. “He’s going to be alright.”
Bodaway was growing more restless now, twitching and struggling in the way that only those on the very brink of their last breath knew how to. Clarke squeezed his hand even more firmly, meeting his gaze unflinchingly as his eyes darted every which way, unseeing.

“M-my...s-son -,” the Chief coughed out, spasming as blood filled his throat, eyes flashing with one last surge of panic as Clarke bent further towards his ear, talking low and steady.

“I’ll keep him safe. He’ll be safe with me - you have my word… I promise.”

With one last belabored breath, Chief Bodaway looked his last, departing from the realm of the living with eyes glued to the one person whose promises he had no reason to believe - no choice but to trust in. Clarke lingered by his ear for a moment, closing her eyes as she breathed through the flash of pain at watching yet another human being leave this life beneath her hands.

No matter how it happened or upon whose soul it would rest, death was never an easy thing to behold - the inevitable conclusion to every story ever told as it was...

Suddenly, the pressure of a hand on her shoulder drew Clarke’s eyes up, looking up and back to find Lexa standing just behind her, expression shrouded in a sunlit frame as she squeezed Clarke’s shoulder almost imperceptibly. As small as it was, the motion was enough to almost visibly draw a layer of stress from Clarke’s shoulders.

The next moment, a gloved hand was coming down, offering its support as Clarke gladly took it and allowed herself to be pulled to her feet. The moment they were at eye level, Clarke was enraptured in the unfiltered devotion she always found in Lexa’s eyes, amplified by the weight of their circumstance and the way their shared gaze seemed to create a space that only the two of them could occupy.

For the briefest of moments when the backs of eyelids shrouded her gaze, Clarke found herself back in her room near the top of the tower in Polis, caught in the span of silence between when one side of the record would flip to the other - suspended only by the look in Lexa’s eyes, the unspoken surety that they would be each other’s most rapturous downfall...

“*Heda - here!!*” Anya’s voice called out over the miserable din of stifled moans and muffled cries of distress. Clarke searched over Lexa’s shoulder, unable to spot the general in the midst of living and dead alike.

“This way, my queen,” the Commander spoke smoothly, her voice completely bereft of emotion as she placed a guiding hand beneath Clarke’s elbow and turned them both.

Clarke allowed herself to be led, completely trusting as Lexa weaved her around bodies both
standing and sprawled, stepping as gingerly and precisely as humanly possible. After only a moment, the two of them came upon Anya crouched over a body, securing a cloth tourniquet into place on the person’s thigh.

Aware of the small group of soldiers now all around them, Clarke did her best to temper her reaction as the face of the man in front of her registered.

“Hakan,” she whispered in shock, immediately dropping to her knees as an internal medical assessment started flying across her mind’s eye.

A bullet wound bled profusely from a spot above his right kneecap, another leaking crimson onto the fabric of his right shoulder. The warrior’s face was screwed up in a grimace as he attempted to breathe through the pain, utterly oblivious to the two women crouching over him. Although the wound to Hakan’s leg was serious, Clarke was overwhelmed with relief that the bullet had missed his femoral artery.

“He’ll live,” Clarke breathed more to herself than to anyone else around her, too numb from adrenaline to really process what that actually meant. “He’s in for a rough couple of days, but he’ll be okay. He’ll be okay…”

She looked over her shoulder at Lexa whose gaze she’d felt on the crown of her head from the moment she’d seen to Hakan, watching a flash of relief cut through that practiced stoicism as the Commander nodded once. She looked to Anya who was still to Clarke’s right, now applying pressure to Hakan’s shoulder wound and providing the fallen warrior with neck support.

“Take the eastern battalion and head for the village,” Lexa commanded, loudly enough for those around them to hear. “Help Abby and Raven with any final preparations for the wounded, and send the warriors back in shifts with field supplies and whatever makeshift stretchers are available for transport.”

Anya bowed her head in acquiescence immediately, springing to her feet and hesitating only the slightest bit to place a gentle hand on Clarke’s shoulder and squeeze. Then, the general was gone, firing off the Commander’s orders to those out of earshot as the cacophony surged back to life.

The next moment, Lexa was crouching down beside Clarke, their shoulders brushing as she leaned in to whisper in Clarke’s ear: “I will do everything in my power to help you keep your promise, hodnes - that is my promise to you.”

Clarke could only nod, lips quivering into a smile as their gazes met from merely a breath away. It took a nearly-inhuman level of restraint for Clarke not to succumb to the instinctual urge to lean in and capture Lexa’s lips in her own, but only a breath more for her to remember herself - remember the life that now quite literally rested in her hands.
Sighing, Clarke looked back down at Hakan, adjusting the tourniquet’s positioning as she unsheathed the knife at her belt, shearing at a piece of fabric near her hip to fashion a sling for him. She met Lexa’s eyes once more, the two of them silently conversing as they came to the conclusion that their moment was over - or, rather, postponed for the sake of duty.

As always.

Wordlessly, Lexa rose to her feet and turned her back to Clarke, forming a protective barrier between Clarke and everyone else as she fired off orders to those assisting the wounded, sectioning off a faction to search for the shooter’s trail.

Though Hakan would almost certainly be alright, Clarke could only steady herself for the inevitable blows that were sure to come with wounds of this nature - the promise of certain death by advanced machinery they were so ill-equipped to deal with in every capacity.

As Echo appeared opposite her, ready to be commanded, Clarke could only shake her head, already feeling exhaustion looming overhead as she spoke:

“Brace yourself - this is gonna be one hell of a night.”

---

Clarke had been right. Of course.

She was surprised that her body had remained upright for so long, her feet quite literally numb from the uninterrupted hours of standing and hurrying from patient to patient.

Almost unseeingly, Clarke pushed through the side door of the main gathering hall as she left the sights and sounds of healing and death behind her. Her mother and Wells were still inside, standing watch over the sleeping wounded and prepping the local healers for the night-watch.

Clarke stumbled onto the cobblestones, scarcely making it more than five feet before she collapsed against the brick wall outside and sunk down onto the stones. Her legs flopped out onto the ground in front of her as her head lolled back against the wall, her hands going limp beside her thighs - the position of one utterly laid bare and ready for some sort of abduction.

Clarke could’ve sworn that sunrise ought to have happened by now - a new dawn on a day that’d reached indiscriminately into every corner of life and death.

Clarke, her mother, and Wells had been on their feet since the afternoon before, hurrying from
patient to patient and surgery to surgery - doing their best with scalpel and whiskey to repair what bullets had ruined. Despite assistance from New Dakota’s healers of varying degrees of skill, they’d only managed to deliver five of the wounded from death’s doorsteps, many of the warriors facing far too much internal damage for anyone to repair in such a rudimentary operating room.

She hated how right her initial assessment of the scene had turned out to be.

Despite the bitter and heavy pill now resting in the pit of her stomach, Clarke found only the slimmest of silver linings in the fact that she’d managed to keep her promise - she’d managed to save Hakan. Though he’d likely face months of intensive physical therapy with a constant level of pain most would find unendurable, Hakan would walk again, and there might even be a time at some distant point in his life when he’d be able to run, too.

Beyond the small note of solace it brought her that she’d been able to keep her word to a dying man, Clarke could feel nothing, think little.

They’d been dealt blow after blow since the moment the shooting had happened, and the lack of proper surgical equipment, morphine, and time was stacking the odds against them at increasingly astronomical heights. When all had been said and done, Clarke could’ve sewn up flesh wound after flesh wound as precisely and safely as possible but, without blood stores, there was little more she could’ve done than send the wounded off into the unknown with that cursed blessing.

...safe passage on your travels...

In the off moments when a thought could be spared toward something less grim, Clarke would see Lexa’s face flash across her mind’s eye, her entire body seeming to ache for the girl despite only having been separated for some odd hours.

The Commander had called a meeting of those left of the clan’s ambassadors, refusing to adjourn until every last detail of the shooting had been hammered down and understood by all. For her part, Clarke sent Echo to act as ambassador to Azgeda, charging her aide to relay Clarke’s theories on the various webs of connection between this incident and the rest (though, admittedly incomplete and fallible as they were). Raven was there, too, providing a more substantive synopsis of the information they’d gathered so far and how they might proceed to unearth more leads.

As it stood, though, their situation was dishearteningly bleak. They were exhausted and drowning in death, possessing little to no clues on how to proceed from here. Every lead they’d pursued had left them in a worse position than the last - and with less warriors, at that.

Not exactly a picker-upper...
Clarke resisted the urge to rub her eyes with the backs of her blood-stained hands, feeling weakness settling in her limbs as her body clung to little more than the chill in the air as a means to keep herself awake. She gave a lazy survey of her surroundings, the quiet morphing from something of peace to the edge of eerie with every passing second...

Through that haze of near-unconsciousness, Clarke suddenly noticed the silhouette of a man walking towards her from beyond the fountain, his identity hidden in shadow. They were the only two people in the square at this hour, all available and relevant personnel either with the Commander, attending the wounded, or sleeping in shifts.

As the man continued directly towards her at a pace she couldn’t discern, the alarm bells started sounding in Clarke’s mind, prickling at the back of her neck as adrenaline crashed into the flood of exhaustion drowning her mind. She pulled her legs to her chest, moving quickly to unsheath the knife at her waist -

“Woah, woah, easy - cool it there, Rambo,” a deep and gravelly voice called to her from closer now, its owner holding his hands up as none other than Bellamy stepped out of the shadows a few feet from her. He wore a long black cloak of sorts over his usual warrior get-up, the circles beneath his eyes almost purpling in the prelude to near-morning.

Bellamy came up right beside her and threw himself down onto the cobblestones as she collapsed back against the wall, smiling half-heartedly at him. He quirked a brow and grinned in that familiar way as he nudged her shoulder with his.

“Guess that means you missed me, then,” he chuckled sarcastically, gaining a snort from Clarke as she shook her head and nudged him back. In truth, she hadn’t even noticed he was gone...

Come to think of it, she couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen him, scarcely conjuring up images of him beyond a day or two outside of Polis -

“I can see the wheels turning in your head right now - it was a joke, Clarke.”

“Yeah, yeah, I got that part. It’s just…,” she trailed off, brows furrowing as she felt her expression contorting in weary confusion. The dried blood on her hands reminded her exactly why that confusion was so intense at the moment.

“Where the hell have you been? I… I can’t even remember the last time I saw you. It couldn’t have been more than two days outside of Polis -,” she cut herself off again, gasping a little as she noticed that Bellamy’s hair was now cropped to just below his ears. It was shaggy enough to get into his eyes and graze his beard, but not enough for his trademark bun - a travesty of epic proportions. “And you cut your hair!”

Bellamy chuckled softly, making a show of shaking his hair out as Clarke caught some of the ends
between her fingertips. He stared up at the stars as she continued gawking at him.

“I suppose I should be hurt, but I can’t even say I blame you with everything that’s been going on…,” he sighed heavily, looking down at his hands crossed over his knees and directing a concerned glance sideways at her. “You haven’t seen me because I haven’t been here - we haven’t been here.”

At Clarke’s look of utter confusion, Bellamy smirked again, feigning reproach as he continued.

“How easily you forget about us… Me, Octavia, and Lincoln,” he clarified, looking away from her as he stared up at the dark sky once more. Clarke felt her cheeks heat at how easily she had forgotten three of her closest friends in Lexa’s company...

“A day after we left the city limits, the Commander sent the three of us on a reconnaissance mission for some...literature, let’s call it. I figured you’d have known about it from the jump...,” he trailed off, quirking a brow above a knowing sideways glance.

Clarke tried her best to ignore its implications.

“Literature?” she repeated back to him, struggling to do much more than hear the words coming out of his mouth. Bellamy nodded, shrugging a little.

“Yeah, I mean, to be honest, if it’d been anyone other than the Commander asking me to do something like this, I would’ve thought they’d lost their goddamned mind. But, since it’s her, I figured there had to have been good reason - there always is.” He was reaching into the inner pocket of his overcoat the next moment, pulling out a worn and folded piece of paper and handing it over to her.

Clarke unfolded it gingerly, taking utmost care not to leave any bloody smudges as her mind struggled to process what her eyes were seeing:

A map. Sort of.

Drawn in dark ink and woven across the page without any obvious care for spatial relativity was a childlike squiggle leading from a fire symbol, between two rock-like symbols, and down towards a tree symbol with a star in its center. Clarke had absolutely no clue was she was looking at.

“Bellamy, if this is some kind of game or something, I’m really not in the mood -,”

“When was the last time I even told a joke, Clarke? Come on now,” he interrupted, gently taking the map from her and pointing towards the fire symbol. “It’s all about perspective... This is Polis, roughly speaking, and this -,” he dragged his finger along the wavy line between the two rocks, “is
the route through Blue Cliff - which we already knew, but the map was more of a key to the mission than an actual map, itself.”

Bellamy adjusted his position on the cobblestones, grunting a bit as though he, too, was feeling slightly worse for wear. He dragged his finger down to the tree symbol, glancing up at Clarke from beneath shaggy tendrils as he spoke.

“Point is, it ends up in Glowing Forest, which is where the Commander told us we’d find an old historian who would lead us to the star if we showed him the map. Turns out, the old guy was a keeper of keys, and the map was the most important one of all - just like I said. Don’t ask, though; we think it’s some old Commander thing, but we never got any clarification on that part…”

Clarke was barely keeping up, but she figured that nodding at this point in Bellamy’s story would give him reason to continue - and get to the point - so she did just that. He continued.

“You should’ve been there, Clarke - it was unreal.” Bellamy’s eyes sparkled all of a sudden, a breath of life surging across his features as he spoke. “It was the biggest library I’d ever seen, and nobody would’ve even known it was there! The whole thing was hidden in the rubble of some ruins from a century ago, and it looked like it hadn’t been touched since then. We wouldn’t have found the place if it hadn’t been for the old man - the ruins were miles out from any Forest villages.

“All the Commander told us was that it was a repository for old knowledge from Before that the Commanders passed down to one another. The old man told us that nothing strategic or political - like the stuff in the tower library - is kept in there; it’s all the other stuff, the cultural pieces... Heda said we needed to look for anything and everything on some kids’ story set in some ‘New Republic,’ - not that that meant anything to us…”

The back of Clarke’s neck prickled at the mention of the name, her mind stirring to proper consciousness for perhaps the first time since Bellamy had plopped down beside her.

Of course Lexa wouldn’t have let that go - it wasn’t in her nature to do so. Unbeknownst to Clarke, she’d probably had the entire capitol turned over for anything on that old story, maybe even sent a group to the ruins of Mt. Weather to see if they could scavenge anything up. Lexa was far too detailed in everything she did to leave such an odd stone unturned…

“ -arke? Hello, Earth to Clarke - you there?” Bellamy nudged her with his shoulder, shaking her out of her train of thought as he eyed her sympathetically. “You’ve gotta get some rest, Clarke. I’m sure your mom and Wells have things covered in there -;”

“Sure, yeah, you’re right,” she agreed a little too quickly, cutting him off as she used his shoulder to push herself into a standing position. Bellamy followed suit immediately, eyeing her cautiously as she swayed a little before him. “You wouldn’t, uh, happen to have any of those books with you, by chance - would you? I could use something to help me get to sleep…”

Bellamy’s expression instantly morphed from one of banked concern to knowing suspicion, his
brows furrowing as he placed his hands on his hips - almost fatherly in his disposition.

“Oh no you don’t - I know that look, and I know that tone,” he shook his head, closing the distance between them and spinning her around as he began pushing her in the direction of the cabins. Clarke let him do it despite both of them knowing full-well that she could’ve bested Bellamy right then and there if she’d wanted to.

“I know you, and I know damn well that you’d stay up all night reading a bunch of fairy tales just for the hell of it - but you need sleep, Clarke. Seriously. You look... rough.”

She elbowed him in the ribs for that one, offering no other form of protest as she continued to allow herself to be pulled away from duty. Her hands were almost stiff from all the dried blood anyways…

“Besides, the books are back in my cabin, and Octavia and Lincoln have been passed out in there ever since we got here. Wouldn’t wanna be the one to wake them now, would you? They’ll still be there in the morning, but you...might not be.”

Clarke sighed and shook her head, hating that Bellamy was making more sense than anything her brain could cobble together at the moment.

She preferred to be the one manipulating him with common sense on a regular basis - the natural order of things.

“You’re annoying when you’re right, Blake.”

Bellamy chuckled beside her, pulling her arm in good fun as she stumbled along beside him.

“Don’t I know it…”

---

What felt like hours later, Clarke was alone in her cabin, scrubbed clean of blood and grime and lying atop her bed quilt in a cloth t-shirt and cotton sweatpants. She’d found the outfit in a drawer of the chest across from the beds, too tired to be mindful of who they actually belonged to.

Clarke’s fingers were pruned and her skin scathed from the amount of time she’d spent in the bath. She’d always somewhat cringed at the idea of sitting in one’s own dirty bathwater for longer than absolutely necessary, but that thought hadn’t even occurred to her tonight - no matter how much
blood and dirt swirled around her as she struggled to even conjure up a thought...

Bellamy had walked her back and helped her up the inside stairs, doing his best to distract her from the past 24 hours by recalling his harrowing tales as a third wheel for the past couple of weeks. Clarke laughed all the way from the square, barely processing things from moment to moment as he got her upstairs and started helping her with her bloody armour and various weapons. Bellamy left her to her privacy shortly after and made his way to the kitchen to rummage through the cabinets for food as she headed for the bath.

He was gone when she’d finally emerged from the bathroom, having stoked a fire and left it burning to warm the otherwise empty cabin for her. It was these subtle and genuine acts of kindness he’d go around doing for his sister and those closest to him that made Clarke ache for imagining what it would’ve been like to have a brother like Bellamy growing up - someone who could’ve helped pick up for the inevitable shortcomings of their shared parents.

She almost wished he’d stayed a bit longer now, maybe found a book to read on the couch downstairs or dozed off after his long journey - if only so that she could feel the comfort of another person’s presence after being so entrenched in the loneliness of death...

Out of nowhere, the front door to her cabin was nearly torn from its hinges, smacking against the wood of the wall and nearly stopping Clarke’s heart before the sound of a familiar and frantic voice rang clear through the cabin.

“Clarke? Clarke, are you here?” Lexa called from the first floor, sounding utterly panicked as boots scuffed across floor. “ Clarke -?”

“Up here, Lex,” Clarke rasped back, hearing an immediate response as Lexa all but sprinted up the stairs to her.

Clarke turned onto her side atop the quilt and propped her head on her hand, brows furrowing in foggy confusion as Lexa appeared at the top of the steps in full uniform with eyes framed in black paint; they were blown wide with horror, her sword poised at the ready in her white-knuckled fist.

The raw fear on Lexa’s face had Clarke bolting upright on the bed, prepared to dive for her weapon at a moment’s notice as Lexa closed the distance between them in a few steps and dropped to her knees in front of Clarke, her sword clanging onto the wood. Lexa took the girl’s face in her hands and began combing over Clarke’s features for what appeared to be any sign of injury, her own features pulled taught by unadulterated dread.

“What is it, Lex? What’s happened -?”

“Where is he? What did he do to you? Are you hurt? Did he touch you - the man who carried you here - did he hurt you -?”
“Wha - Bellamy? What do you mean, did he hurt me? What on earth - ?” Lexa immediately froze at the mention of Bellamy’s name, her brows furrowing and a flash of frenzy crossing her gaze as her hands stilled on either side of Clarke’s face.

“Bellamy?” Lexa repeated back to her, eyes searching Clarke’s intensely now. Clarke nodded, mouth ajar as she placed her own hands over Lexa’s where they held her.

“Y-yeah… He found me almost passed out in the square after I’d finished the last surgery. He wanted to make sure I got home alright, so he walked me back here and presumably robbed us blind of food - but there was most definitely zero carrying involved… what’s going on, Lexa?” Clarke pressed down on both of Lexa’s hands, watching as the other girl struggled to process the words for a moment and then nearly collapsed with her sigh of utter relief.

Lexa hung her head a little and shook it slowly as she spoke, her expression shielded from Clarke. A moment later, she spoke much more quietly, her voice trembling a little:

“I went looking for you at the town hall after our meeting adjourned and found no one but the Dakota healers attending the wounded. They told me they’d taken over for you, your mother, and Wells some hours ago, but then one of them mentioned they’d seen you being carried off by some large man who they assumed to have been in my guard. I, not having ordered any of my men to do so… well, I suppose I assumed the worst.”

It took a moment in her exhausted state, but as soon as Lexa’s words clicked in Clarke’s mind, she groaned and pulled Lexa into her chest. The other girl sunk completely into Clarke’s body as she wrapped her arms around Clarke’s waist - the picture of equal parts relief and exhaustion. They held each other until Clarke was almost completely supporting Lexa’s weight, untying and working through the girl’s intricate braids as she rested her head on Clarke’s thighs and allowed herself to be completely doted upon. Neither of them spoke for quite some time, too far lost in the day to have anything left to say. After all, words could only go so far.

But, touch … Touching, comforting, holding - that would always be enough. That would always be the only way to say everything.

“Let me take care of you, Lex,” Clarke whispered after an eternity in peaceful silence, Lexa practically asleep in her full uniform still.

The words immediately pulled them back to another time, another night - another lifetime, even. Lexa lifted her head slowly, carefully, fixing Clarke with a look weighted by a thousand adoring sentiments as Clarke rubbed a thumb over smudged paint. She returned the look in kind, immersing them both in that arduous sanctity of truly seeing each other, feeling each other’s presence in every
fiber and granule of their being.

If gazes, alone, could create friction and fill spaces with warmth enough to spark, Clarke was sure she and Lexa would level the entire village to ash with the sheer force of devotion that passed between them now. It grew with every passing second, pulsing around and inside of them like the tangible feeling of sound - the way it vibrates your fingertips and trembles through the soles of your feet.

It was a pulse becoming a need transforming into an inevitability, and Clarke could do nothing more than give in to it as she leaned down and captured Lexa’s lips in her own. She moaned into Lexa’s mouth and felt that full bottom lip quiver in response, their breathing growing more and more audibly ragged as fingers knotted in hair and lips became greedier.

Without creating even an inch between them, Clarke guided Lexa to her feet, parting only for a moment to ask:

“Are we alone tonight?”

Lexa nodded, her lips catching on Clarke’s hand as it brushed past to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear.

“I sent Echo and Raven back with Anya, and I can only assume that Wells went with your mother - and they’re all...smart.”

Clarke closed her eyes and breathed a heavy sigh of relief, feeling a surge of excitement at the prospect of having Lexa completely to herself for the first time in what felt like ages. She opened them again at the press of lips peppering kisses across every inch of her cheeks, almost giddy with the exquisiteness of the feeling. After a moment, though, Clarke held a finger up to Lexa’s lips, halting the onslaught of kisses and gaining a very adorably disgruntled pout from those same lips.

“In that case, the night shall commence...”

The pout melted right off of Lexa’s face the instant Clarke began undoing all of the various buckles adorning Lexa’s person, peeling each layer off with noticeable care as Lexa once again gave Clarke full control. Clarke didn’t allow herself to meet Lexa’s gaze as she worked, feeling the sheer intensity of it like an open flame to her skin without even witnessing it for herself. She couldn’t allow herself to be distracted from the mission at hand…

Once Lexa stood before her in nothing but undergarments - her hair matted and wild where it fell over her shoulders in waves - Clarke took her by the hand and met that ardent stare on her, gulping down the swell of emotions filling her throat as she did so. She turned and led Lexa to the bathroom,
making her intentions exceptionally clear as she twisted the spigot and began filling the tub with coal-warmed water.

In the meantime, Clarke turned to face Lexa, struck speechless by the raw tenderness on full display in every curve and plain of Lexa’s features. Clarke couldn’t help but lean in, smiling against Lexa’s lips as the girl sighed with contentment at the sensation of it.

She pushed against Lexa and began backing her up in search of the cloth near the tub, eliciting a giggle from Lexa as Clarke grunted in pseudo-difficulty, making a show of bending them in strange angles to make a grab for the cloth.

The two of them came apart smiling, Clarke reaching to soak the cloth in bathwater as Lexa knotted her hands in the fabric at Clarke’s waist, making it clear she had no intention of letting go as Clarke began steadily wiping paint from Lexa’s cheeks.

For some reason, the intimacy of this action always watered her eyes: the way their breathing intermingled in what minimal space was left between them; how Lexa would close her eyes and make the cutest little noises beneath her breath whenever Clarke would linger gratuitously in one place or another; the indescribable feeling of being the one and only person alive who was allowed to touch the Commander in such a way...

God, if only words were enough.

Minutes later, Clarke was bending to turn off the water, straightening back up with nervous anticipation curling in the pit of her stomach and sinking downward.

She wasted no time, though, allowing no space for the water to cool as she closed the distance to Lexa, levelling that growing storm of fervor overtaking vast forests with her own eyes cool and calm as the surface of still water.

Lexa nodded before Clarke even had time to think the question, giving her all the cues she needed as she grasped onto the hem of Lexa’s undershirt and pulled it gingerly up and over the girl’s torso. Clarke barely had time to even glance before Lexa was pressing her naked torso against Clarke’s chest, separated only by a single layer of cloth now. They both gasped at the feeling of it, Lexa knotting her hands in the fabric on Clarke’s lower back as fingernails grazed bare skin.

Both allowed themselves to be healed by the embrace, lingering far too long and relishing in the warmth of their joined bodies. Clarke was the first to pull back after a while, her eyes immediately memorizing every inch of Lexa’s torso as her lips parted in near-shock, utterly stunned to silence. Every curve, every bit of softness and muscle, solace and strength captured in ink on skin… It would never cease to amaze her.

She met Lexa’s eyes again with tears in her own, helpless and overcome as Lexa held her face and caressed her cheeks. With the smallest of movements, the last bit of clothing on Lexa’s body fell to a pile at her feet, immediately pulling Clarke too close to breathe - still not close enough.
Standing there like that, holding each other for dear life after so much sorrow… There was a time in the not-so-distant past when Clarke had really and truly believed she’d never get another moment like this. Not for as long as she’d end up living.

She had never been so grateful to be wrong.

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“I can’t remember the last time I felt so relaxed,” Lexa mused as Clarke washed the last bit of shampoo from her hair, playing with the ends for a moment while Lexa smiled up at her, totally serene. “You are very good at this, you know.”

Clarke returned the smile, placing a kiss on the top of Lexa’s head as she began gently massaging Lexa’s shoulders. Lexa moaned gratuitously at the feeling, sending a pang straight down into the depths of Clarke’s core as she worked into the tight muscle.

“It’s nice to do something good with my hands for a change,” Clarke responded quietly sometime later, feeling Lexa stiffen beneath her hands at the words. She looked over her shoulder at Clarke, a line of concern creasing the space between her brows.

“How are you doing after everything that happened today, Clarke? I should have asked earlier, but I -,”

“No, no, you’re fine, love,” Clarke cut her off gently, continuing her massage as Lexa gazed up at her with concern aching in her beautiful eyes. “It’s...been a long day for all of us, to say the least.”

Lexa nodded slowly at that, the movement taking on that ancient weariness that Clarke used to find so tragic whenever she’d catch a glimpse of it. Now, she understood it far more intimately than either of them would’ve cared for her to.

“I wonder sometimes…,” Clarke started, trailing off as she struggled to find the proper words. Lexa waited patiently as ever, watching as Clarke moved from where she stood behind the tub to sit on the floor beside it, facing Lexa as she did so.

“We’re young now, you and me. We have days like this that feel like years, and our bodies still manage to work the next day no matter how mediocre the sleep... We’ll wear out eventually, but, at
least for now, the physical stuff - the fighting, the injuries, and whatever else - that stuff never really gets to me. But...the death.” Clarke swallowed, shaking her head a little as she stared off into nothingness, feeling Lexa’s eyes on her like a physical caress to her cheek.

“The pain we cause and feel… sometimes I wonder how much of that a person can actually take, you know?”

Lexa nodded thoughtfully in response, drawing Clarke’s attention back to her as she worked at her bottom lip. Clarke could tell she was looking for the right words, careful as ever in her pursuit of articulating thoughts that always seemed to elude even the sharpest of minds.

“I do - often, actually.” She met Clarke’s stare with a flash of something burning just below the surface of her vision - that devastating worry she always harbored in dreadful anticipation of history repeating itself. Clarke tried not to cringe at the sight of it.

“It reminds me of something Anya once told me when I was 11 or so... She said that some of the oldest among us wear the youngest faces - that some will suffer an entire lifetime’s worth in a matter of weeks or months and spend the rest of their time breathing trying to recover from it.”

Lexa’s lips tightened into a line for a moment, closing her eyes as her jaw worked - doing her best to conceal some strong emotion just beneath the surface.

“What she didn’t tell me then - what she could not have known possible - was that some will be doomed to repeat those lifetimes.”

Clarke closed her eyes, feeling the words hit her like a punch to the gut as she could do nothing but drown in the horrible truth of them - of their lived and shared reality.

The next moment, though, Lexa was reaching out to cup Clarke’s cheek, grazing her thumb over soft lips as water dripped carelessly about. Clarke opened her eyes again, surprised to find that wonderful serenity and gorgeous satisfaction back in Lexa’s features, softening every edge previously disturbed by painful memories.

“I was always taught that Commanders were destined to meet such dreadful fates, regardless of the choices they made - that companionship, trust, and love were luxuries of the weak and burdens on the souls of leaders. I believed it even through all of the love in my life that made me better. I believed it despite the way it brightened every one of my days and gave me reason to wake each morning… I believed it, up until the day I knew I loved you.”

Lexa shook her head a little, eyes soft but wide as if still in awe of this realization. Clarke turned her head a little to kiss Lexa’s wrist, nuzzling into it as Lexa continued to speak.
“You were my revelation, Clarke. Every day since you came into my life has felt like a second chance… It’s why I know with more certainty than I know the tenets of my own duty that I would do it all again - live every lifetime with exactly the same outcomes. If only so that I could be here, with you, right now.”

Clarke was on her knees and leaning over the tub before Lexa could even finish, pressing their foreheads together as they breathed raggedly with shared emotion, overcome with feelings more powerful than those currently named. It was too much for a single soul to contain within it, which is why their two had merged to one so many times before - why it was happening again now out of sheer need.

Two bodies, two souls, a thousand lifetimes… It didn’t feel like it was ever going to be enough.

“I will not pretend to know what is going to happen tomorrow or the next day, or even the day after that. But, as long as you are with me, I know we will survive it. In fact, we will do so much more than that because… Because you have liberated me, Clarke - forever.”

It was as though everything clicked back into place the moment their lips met again, revealing all in the universe that words could never have uncovered. Passion was not nearly adequate enough - the feeling could scarcely keep up with what the two of them were creating together as their kisses became those of zealots.

Before either of them could process the instinct, Lexa was wrapped around Clarke’s body, lifted up and out of the tub as Clarke turned to carry them both from the bathroom - not a single thought spared otherwise.

They crashed onto the bed together as Lexa practically tore Clarke’s shirt from her body, the two of them moaning far too loudly at the feeling of skin on skin - that perfect friction it created. Their kisses grew more desperate then - all tongues and teeth and gasps -, their touches less gentle.

This was nothing like their first time. This was neither caution nor restraint, hesitance nor nervousness; this was rough, messy, delicious and wild.

It was pure instinct that drove them both, calling them to give in to every salacious desire that had been so repressed and contained by equal parts responsibility and tragedy. They let their lips and hands act as tools to personify desires that’d been so difficult to articulate through the pain that so often defined and guided their movements. That pain had done its job well up until now, keeping them confined to the performative actions their positions required in a circumstance that’d allowed time for little else.

But, now - finally - they had time.
It was an unspoken agreement given with enthusiastic consent between them that neither was to
leave a single inch of the other’s skin untended, no ounce of pleasure left to wither away. Nothing
could stop them from experiencing the pinnacle of ecstasy within human flesh now.

The moment their fingers entered each other, drowned out by their euphoric cries of bliss - that was
when Clarke knew. That moment was when she knew why they’d waited for this point in time to re-
discover each other - for this space between heartbreak and sunrise where they were each other’s
only master...

They’d needed those weeks of hesitance, those quiet conversations away from prying eyes and ears
beneath the stars, to really and truly figure out how to be with one another again - or, at least, how to
do so without suffering from the paralyzing fear of being so violently ripped apart again. Although
that terror still remained in the shadow of every move made and in the space between every word
spoken, they’d needed this time together again to truly re-acquaint themselves with how capable they
both were in holding their own, regardless of circumstance.

They needed to be sure that this was really and truly their reality again.

At this intersection of need and fate, Commander and Queen were no more; Clarke and Lexa reigned
supreme. They’d discovered this supremacy in the scrape of teeth against the skin of shoulder and
neck, the rapturously unsteady rhythm of thrusts, the whispered worship from lips belonging to the
fully-consumed…

This was the way it was always meant to be.

As the two of them climbed and climbed towards that glorious peak, Clarke couldn’t help but
wonder if anyone else had ever truly loved another person the way she loved Lexa, the way Lexa
loved Clarke. The idea that their love was even remotely unoriginal felt contradictory to every
impossible emotion coursing through Clarke’s body right now as Lexa’s gaze uplifted her soul and
reinvigorated her purpose, her name falling from Lexa’s lips in breathless veneration.

Nothing had ever felt as vital to a living thing as Lexa was to Clarke, and no words would ever truly
be enough to define just how much she’d missed her.

---

“Lexa - oh my god… fuck yes.”
Clarke’s words were almost indiscernible from the utterly indecent sounds coming out of her mouth as Lexa’s tongue made expertly relentless work of her clitoris, hitting every spot she was needed most - and so many more.

Clarke’s left hand was knotted in the bed sheets beside her as her right intertwined with Lexa’s free hand, the other pumping inside of her with abandon.

“*Yes, baby, right there - fuck!!!*”

The way Lexa’s features cast a smug vision as her motions grew even more superbly confident was enough to wreck every last scintilla of Clarke’s restraint, hurling her up and over that delicious peak to the sound of Lexa’s perfect name exalted for all to hear.

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Sunlight streamed in through the upper window in ribbons of gold, making stripes of their naked bodies tangled in sheets - and each other.

Clarke had no idea what time it was, nor how long they’d been asleep. In truth, she could barely remember falling asleep at all, the sequence of events blurred together and filtered through a haze of blissful valleys and peaks.

And a great many peaks there were…

Lexa stirred in her place tucked against Clarke’s chest, her long hair falling over pale skin in waves. Clarke moved to brush a strand of hair from Lexa’s forehead, earning an adorable sigh of contentment from Lexa who blinked a few times from beneath her long lashes.

“What year is it?” Lexa whispered a little too seriously, earning a loud laugh from Clarke as she held Lexa tighter to her.

“You know, I’m not quite sure about that one… Is this some alternate reality where nobody barges in on us or drops a crisis in our laps every other hour? If so, I’m not quite sure I’m qualified to answer that question.”

It was Lexa’s turn to laugh now, the motion of it shaking her entire body and doing wonderful things
to the way they were connected as she nuzzled further into Clarke.

“No, but I do believe this is our people finally following orders; I gave all personnel the ‘day off,’ as you would say. Their orders were to leave us - and each other, for that matter - in peace so that we could all recover from yesterday… I think we have all more than earned it at this point.”

“Oh, yesterday…,” Clarke mused in disbelief, shaking her head slowly and staring up at the ceiling as she tried to recall everything that had happened since her and Hakan’s conversation on the hillside. It seemed like a lifetime ago…

“And what are they gonna think of their Commander saddled up with the Ice Queen all day, huh?” Clarke nudged Lexa a little, earning a raised eyebrow above a smirk as Lexa tucked her foot more securely between Clarke’s calves.

“How on earth would we be ‘saddled up’ together when we are sleeping in different cabins, Clarke?” Lexa asked with a crooked smile growing across her features, tone playful. “As far as the people of New Dakota are aware, we are at opposite sides of the city with entirely different entourages guarding our persons. What reason would they have to believe otherwise?”

Clarke chuckled a little as Lexa feathered kisses over her breast, almost uncharacteristically playful as they held each other.

“Well, I can think of a couple different reasons who all got exiled to various cabins last night…”

“Are you questioning the loyalty of our advisers, my love?” Lexa asked with pseudo-solemnity, rolling up onto her elbow to fix Clarke with an expectant gaze. Every inch of her expression practically dripped with affection, sending a surge of warmth through Clarke’s veins as she moved to brush her fingers over the tattoo on Lexa’s upper arm.

“I mean, we’re not exactly subtle - and that’s putting it lightly, according to Raven.”

Easy as the subject should’ve been, it had always taken on an entirely different complexity for the two of them, the nature of their individual positions seemingly always at odds - and even more so now. Culturally, it just simply wasn’t the norm for Commanders to have long-term partners of any kind, no matter either party’s clan of origin.

Now, with both of them beholden to factions of people possessing historically-opposed ideologies - regardless of who they all ultimately answered to - it added a far more delicate political layer that would most likely take years to navigate. Add this element into the never-ending stream of dire
circumstances they constantly found themselves in - and the ever-loom ing fact of Clarke’s inevitable return to Azgeda - and it made for quite the emotional obstacle course.

Lexa sensed the immediate darkening of Clarke’s mood, of course, her own darkening as shared trains of thought drifted between them. She leaned down to press a chaste kiss to Clarke’s lips, lingering for several moments before settling back.

“I know, hodnes ,” she nearly whispered, eyes lowered as she appeared to stare off into nothingness, looking exceptionally troubled despite the glow still in her cheeks. “It’s something that haunts my thoughts every single day, and I would be lying if I claimed to have anything close to a solution for us right now.”

Lexa looked up to meet Clarke’s gaze on her then, eyes gleaming with the reverence burning in them as she reached up to cradle Clarke’s face in her hand.

“All I can think about right now - all I am going to focus on today - is being with you. That is all I want to think about… That, and keeping you in my sight and by my side at all times.”

They both winced a little at the recollection of old memories, the events following their first time making love still trailing them both like a dreadful poltergeist in their periphery at all times.

Clarke could only pull Lexa closer, allowing the girl to cling almost desperately to her as they both breathed through the remnants of memories that’d scarred them both in more ways than one. Time continued to make it easier on them - and last night was almost certainly a milestone to be celebrated in their road to recovery - but life would always have ways of bringing that trauma right to the surface, weighting their every step to the earth as they struggled through the drudges of it all.

Still, if any person could brave the trenches with her - both empathizing with and healing every scar on her body and soul - Clarke knew that Lexa would be the one to pull her through.

She would always be the one.

“I’ll most definitely hold you to that,” Clarke finally responded, aiming for levity to pick them both back up as Lexa continued clinging to her. “Besides, it seems like the two of us have got some reading to do…”

Lexa looked up then, momentarily confused until a detail from last night smoothed the crease between her brows.
“Ah, I figured Bellamy probably clued you in on all of that... I really did mean to tell you, Clarke, I just -,”

“No, no - you don’t have to explain anything to me, Lex. I get it,” Clarke interrupted her gently, finding Lexa’s hand and bringing it up to press a kiss to the girl’s knuckles. She really did understand - and probably would’ve done the same thing had the thought even crossed her mind.

This was yet another example of why Lexa was the Commander and Clarke her understudy (of sorts).

“Do you really think those stories have anything to do with the kidnappings?” Clarke asked, genuinely curious. Lexa shrugged a little, expression growing immediately weary as she sighed.

“To be completely honest with you, I haven’t the faintest idea… Still, I thought it better to leave no stone unturned than to let any potential clues slip through the cracks.”

Clarke nodded in consideration, working at her lower lip for a moment as Lexa continued.

“Perhaps the kidnappers are following a directive from one of the iterations of the story? Or, maybe the ‘New Republic’ that Wallace mentioned is some kind of organization that fancies themselves copycats of whatever villain dominates the fictitious storyline… I could be completely off-base, but - ,”

“But you could also be on to something,” Clarke finished for her, nodding at the same time as Lexa. “At this point, whatever lead we can find is a lead worth following. I mean, we’re quite literally at the end of our rope here -,”

The sound of the front door to the cabin slowly creaking open had both of them lurching up in the bed, instinctively going for their weapons before a voice filled the air.

“Don’t shoot, guys - it’s just me!” Raven called up to them, shutting the front door behind her as Clarke and Lexa visibly deflated.

“Don’t even think about coming up here!” Clarke called back immediately, sharing a look of exasperation with Lexa as the two of them launched out of bed in search of clothes.

“Noted,” Raven answered from presumably right by the door, oddly apprehensive as Clarke pulled the t-shirt over her head. Before she even had time to think about it, though, Raven was speaking again, sounding uncharacteristically uncomfortable as she did so:
“Look, I know today was supposed to be a day of ‘peace’ or whatever, but, uh… I think we may have a problem, guys.”

Clarke and Lexa looked to each other at the same time, both of their expressions screaming the same two words in unison -

*What now?*

Chapter End Notes

hope it was worth the wait ??? lmao

although I won't even attempt to predict when the next update will be, I CAN promise that I'll be finishing this story in the way I'd originally intended. i'm so sorry it's taking so long, but i just wanna do it right, you know?

(in the meantime, lemme shamelessly plug my tumblr for anyone who wants to come drool over women with me lol - @spiceydiceyboi)

until next time, kids.
Rhymes and Reason

Chapter Summary

Recap:
After being lured into a valley where their enemy awaited with a bullet-ridden ambush, Clarke, Lexa and the crew found themselves playing defense to a superior enemy yet again. Clarke spent a bloody night on her feet doing her best to keep her promise to the late Chief, saving his son, Hakan, and patching up wounds where she could. Old friends returned from afar and mysteries expanded as yet another set of clues was added to the seemingly never-ending list. Despite their predicament, Clarke and Lexa found themselves able to share in each other once more for a single night of bliss -- that is, before Raven came bursting through the doors bringing more troubles to lay at their feet...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Explain it again, but slower.”

Raven looked like she had to physically swallow whatever slew of verbal scorn was building within, closing her eyes and hanging her head as everyone stared expectantly.

Clarke shared a look with Anya who stood behind Raven, arms crossed over her chest beneath an expression of barely-contained skepticism. Wells and Bellamy stood on either side of her, the two of them waiting as they looked around the room to try to catch the eyes of Lincoln or Octavia huddled together to Clarke’s left. Abby stood beside Raven doing her best to piece the puzzle together for herself. Maya and Thomas did their best to make themselves scarce, the two of them nearly rigid with tension as they waited. Echo was restless as ever on Clarke’s flank, all banked energy as her hand remained clamped around her sword handle.

Lexa, for her part, stood silent and measured to Clarke’s right, their shoulders brushing constantly with that incessant need they’d re-awakened last night - that need to touch at all times, make sure the other was still there. Their fingertips brushed beneath the table in a gesture of mutual reassurance as Raven began speaking again, sounding as at her wit’s end as the rest of them felt.

“I told you - I’m not 100% sure of anything at this point, but what I do know is that, if this geographical pattern leads where I think it does, we’re heading straight off of any current map we’ve got available to us. All known clan territories end with the Plain Riders’ land, and my calculated trajectory of the next kidnapping has us traveling at least twenty miles west of the Riders’ furthestmost border - right into no-man’s-land.”

“Impossible,” Anya whispered after a while, the first and only sound in a room filled with bated breath. “There’s nothing but dead earth and waste for a hundred miles beyond the Commander’s domain. The Plain Riders run periodic checks of the wasteland every few years and send word to the
“And there has been nothing but relics of a society long-gone in nearly a hundred years of reports,” Lexa finished for her, the two of them sharing a weighted look across the room as all eyes settled on them.

Bellamy was already shaking his head before she could even finish, approaching the table and fidgeting with the map as he worked his jaw in frustration. “Nothing. It was all a prolonged metaphor. I thought the ‘shining city on a hill’ was an actual place - you know, a city, presumably on a hill somewhere, probably shiny - but that was wrong, too.” Bellamy shook his head, rolling his eyes in exasperation as he crossed his arms tightly over his chest. “Everything from the settings to the characters was all an allusion towards some ideal of socioeconomic prosperity in a post-modern society -- and a shotty allusion, at that… If I could figure out the origin of the metaphor, I might be able to piece together some of the context we’re missing -- the who, what, where, why -- but I have no idea how I’d find that information out given our current...predicament.”

“Reagan,” Maya spoke up suddenly, causing a lot of swiveling necks and searching eyes. She pushed off the wall that she and Thomas were leaning on, approaching them slowly with a far-off look overtaking her features. “That’s the ‘who’ of the metaphor, Bellamy -- Ronald Reagan, the 40th President of the United States. Or, what used to be known as the United States…”

Every expression in the room appeared utterly clueless to the name, except for Bellamy -- the history buff of the group -- and Abby, whose eyes widened at the mention of the name as she snapped her fingers. Almost like a lightbulb had gone off above her head. “Yes, yes, that’s it! I knew I recognized the phrase from somewhere!” she exclaimed, motioning for Octavia to bring her a copy of one of the storybooks as she began riffling through its pages. “Reagan pulled it from a biblical parable during one of his speeches --.”

“His ‘Vision for America’ address!” Bellamy interrupted her, coming up to read over Abby’s shoulder as she continued flipping through its pages. His eyes were alight with excitement now, ten steps beyond everyone else in the room who remained quiet with apprehension.

Bellamy shrugged off Octavia’s judgmental gaze as he read over Abby’s shoulder, nearly bubbling over with animation now. “I used to horde books on 20th century American history -- arguably one of the most explosive
centuries in human history for more reasons than one --, and rhetoric was always my favorite… I can’t believe I couldn’t remember the ‘shining city’ metaphor! This was, like, the most memorable speech Reagan ever gave --,”

“And his presidency was one of the most historically consequential,” Maya finished for him, coming up to stand beside him as he nodded in agreement. They shared a weighted glance, passing shared knowledge between them as everyone else stared.

It was clear they were going to have to walk the room through this.

“The way it was always taught to me -- to us --,” she gestured between herself and Thomas, “was that Reagan was the catalyst, the first in a slew of leaders that gave control of pretty much all national resources and power to the smallest group of people possible -- the elite, the wealthy. Presidency after presidency, less than one percent of the population gained all the power and capital while the rest of the populace suffered from a decaying social safety net, increasing sociopolitical tensions, constant cyber threats, resurgences of theocratic fascism, and impending global climate catastrophe…”

She trailed off, looking to Thomas to finish for her as he stepped forward and cleared his throat.

“His ‘vision’ was an illusion, not an allusion; it was designed to keep the population striving towards an ideal of the ‘American dream’ that was as inaccessible to all Americans as world peace was and will always be to humans. It was never intended to be attained by anyone other than those who’d created it -- those who were in power and desired to stay there, who designed a system that convinced the many to protect the interests of the few… As insidious as it was, it was rather --,”

“Brilliant,” Bellamy finished for him, eyes still alight with that conspiratorial spark. “Disgusting, abhorrent, deceptive, far-reaching and disastrous, but utterly brilliant. It catered to the very worst instincts of those who believed that equality meant taking them down a few pegs on the hierarchy to account for everyone else --,”

"Which is exactly what it would’ve meant in the United States at the time,” Thomas countered, shrugging a little as he stuffed his hands in his pockets. “The system was only designed to have a limited number of white male property owners at the top; so, why advocate for real systemic change when you can take the easy way out and use virtue-signalling and fear-mongering to keep your beloved 18th century system in place?”

“Touche,” Bellamy smirked, very clearly enthralled with the direction of the conversation. “After all, base-level fear has always been the most compelling political motivator throughout human history --,”

“Okay, hello? Earth to Socrates -- what the hell does this have to do with the current very real, very immediate threat from the child-snatching psychopath with a machine gun who just killed more than ten of our friends?” Raven cut them off, throwing up her hands in exasperation as Thomas paled and Bellamy rolled his eyes. “How did we get from maps to children’s books to the fucking philosophy of fear? Can we please get back to the issue at hand?”
“First of all, Socrates had nothing to do with fear -- although, one could argue that his views on death might’ve had some overlap --,”

“Alright, enough!” Clarke shouted, cutting Bellamy off as she slammed her palms down on the table, abruptly silencing the room. She felt Lexa’s hand settle on the small of her back almost immediately, obscured from view by the proximity of their bodies. “Raven’s right -- we’ve completely gone off the rails here… We’ve established the ‘who’ of this one particular metaphor from this one particular part of the story -- and that’s all well and good -- but what does that have to do with the bigger picture? And, beyond that, how does it get us even half a step closer to catching our culprit?”

“Unless we think this Reagan asshole re-spawned, grabbed a machine gun, and started snatching kids and racking up body counts from a very particular pattern of geographical locations --,”

“What about the ‘where’?” Anya interrupted Raven, her tone a measured counterbalance to Raven’s abrasive rambling. “Where did this Reagan give his speech? Or, better, where was he from?”

“The speech was an address given from the White House -,”

“Which is now in a pile of rubble in TonDC,” Raven finished for Bellamy, cutting him across with almost physically-palpable perturbation.

“He was from what used to be known as the state of California originally,” Abby added after a moment, interrupting the short-lived quiet as she directed an exceptionally annoyed gaze between Raven and Bellamy. “Hundreds of miles from here at the very least.”

Anya nodded slowly at that, somber expression mirroring that of almost every face in the room now. It was as if in that very moment, every single soul in the room had come to the same conclusion -- the same cliff’s edge from which neither rhyme nor reason could be reached. Even Lexa seemed at her wit’s end now, the dark cloud in the room shrouding her eyes just the same as the rest of them -- an unusually public display of uncertainty from her.

Clarke had to resist the urge to slam her fists onto the table again, feeling a hopeless sort of anger swelling within her like a surge of vertigo. They’d been inside for hours throwing around scenario after scenario and theory after theory, and she simply couldn’t take anymore of it -- this listless sort of pondering over dead-end after dead-end.

Patience had never been one of the virtues she’d possessed.

“I need a minute,” Clarke muttered more to herself than anyone else, feeling every pair of eyes on her as she hastened around the table towards the cabin door.

She didn’t spare a glance over her shoulder as she burst out of what felt like her own personal enclosure into the crisp evening air. She knew that Lexa would be worried if she got too far away from her -- Lexa always worried -- but she just needed...space.
Unironically, Clarke glanced up at the sky filled to the brim with colors in the setting sun, wishing for the resolute hum of that metal ring for what had to be the first time in her life.

As she started down the path towards the center of the village at barely more than an amble, hands hanging defeatedly by her sides, Clarke found herself back in the tight metal hallways of the Ark. Her footsteps echoed quietly amongst the vibrations of the mechanisms around her, guiding her towards the only spot on the entire rig where she felt she could fully catch her breath in those days.

She saw the window as clear as a picture on the back of her eyelids, filled to almost every corner with Earth at its various stages of rotation. Despite what she knew to be happening down below, the planet had always seemed so still to her -- perhaps the only stillness in that ever-moving pseudo-habitat.

Clarke longed for it now, that sensation of quiet suspension -- the metaphorical breath before a slow and painful exhale.

She’d been as innocent as the Ark had allowed her to be then, long before the stench of blood and death had seeped into the very fiber of her being, permanently contaminating every stitch of clothing she’d worn since. She hadn’t had to make any decisions that held weight then, and it’d been enough to lull her into a false sense of security before the reality of her surroundings caught up to her...

As she reached the end of the block, Clarke smiled to herself, an image forming almost clear as day in her mind’s eye: flowing waves of brown cascading over shoulders clothed in standard-issue uniform for Alpha station, emerald eyes dancing in the light of the atmosphere. A slender hand reaching out to squeeze Clarke’s in excitement as the girl looked upon Earth for the first time -- all part of Clarke’s grand plan to gain her affections.

Perhaps they would’ve crossed paths in the main mess hall at some early point, both girls attempting to hide that instant fascination with one another -- that powerful urge to watch how the other moved in every setting. Perhaps those stolen glances and hidden stares would’ve turned to pining in the midst of an Earth Skills course, neither one aware enough to identify why it felt so important that they be seated within view of each other at all times -- but never near enough to speak. Perhaps Clarke would’ve challenged Lexa to a game of chess when looking became insufficient, silently eager to find herself only a table-top’s distance away from the one person whose face she could never shake -

“Clarke?” She felt Lexa’s presence before she heard her voice, a gentle hand resting on her shoulder as Clarke turned to face her.

Lexa removed her hand a little too slowly in the open air, stepping instinctually into that space shared so sacredly between them before remembering herself. Green eyes glistened with that ever-present worry she reserved only for Clarke, that gentle concern creating the smallest of lines between perfect brows. If Clarke could’ve pressed her lips to it, she was sure there would’ve been no better feeling.

“Are you alright, hodnes?” Lexa asked softly, clearly fighting the urge to re-tuck a strand of Clarke’s hair behind her ear. Clarke sighed deeply, wishing at the very core of herself that she could just lean
forward and rest her head over the place where Lexa’s pulse could be felt most prominently.

She nodded after a moment, though, turning back in the direction she’d been walking and motioning for Lexa to accompany her. They walked together in silence for a few moments more, shoulders brushing every couple of steps as they set the easiest of paces.

“I just needed to get away from all of that for a bit, you know?” Clarke answered finally, watching as Lexa nodded with immediate understanding. “If I’d had to endure one more rapid-fire history session from Bellamy and/or Raven, I think I might’ve ended up killing them both.”

Lexa seemed to have been considering this option quite seriously as well, lips quirking at the memory.

“It would’ve been quite the attractive option, wouldn’t it?”

“Beats standing around talking in circles about absolutely nothing,” Clarke agreed bitterly, shaking her head a little as Lexa’s eyes settled on her profile. She felt the slightest of squeezes on the hand hanging between them, drawing her attention up so that their gazes met as they meandered.

Lexa’s expression was filled with such a swelling of compassion that Clarke nearly stumbled over the cobblestone pathway. It was amplified by the light of the setting sun, reminiscent of some sort of Renaissance painting with the sheer beauty of it.

“I know, love. I feel the same,” Lexa spoke softly, shoulder brushing Clarke’s as she fixed her eyes on the ground, lips pursed in disquiet. Her hands were intertwined behind her back, posture as fixed as ever, but Clarke could see it -- the same exhaustion and end-of-rope feelings she currently felt in every line of her own body. “I’d thought that Raven might provide us a sliver of something -- a clue, a direction, anything -- but now it seems as though we are at an even greater loss than before --.”

“And without a geographical pattern to follow,” Clarke finished for her, sharing a weighted glance with Lexa as the girl nodded, sighing defeatedly.

Clarke had never seen Lexa so at a loss -- not over anything related to mission or strategy, anyway. She never thought she’d see the day when the Commander of the 12 clans would hang her head in utter confoundment, on the same footing as the rest of them as they all waited to be unwittingly dragged in the next random direction.

Always two steps behind their shared enemy who remained as elusive as a ghost now.

“No wisdom from the past Commanders, then, I take it?” Clarke joked after a while spent strolling in silence, doing her best to lighten the mood and immediately eliciting a wry smile from Lexa’s full
“No tips or tricks on how to catch a kidnapper with a machine gun?”

“Not one that potentially presides in the wasteland, no,” Lexa answered easily, smile falling rather quickly as a shadow crossed her features. “Besides, I can never count on their advice in any sort of reliable way. It is always through a flash of memory or a fever dream on a particularly restless night, scarcely helpful.”

Clarke’s pace hiccuped momentarily, attempting to process the surprising response to her jest as Lexa watched her. This was new information; she’d only ever known of the actual written history of the Commanders and the training process leading up to the Conclave — nothing of actual, tangible wisdom passed down from a bunch of dead leader’s memories.

She had always wondered what the Flamekeepers were for besides training different batches of kids for slaughter, though...

“You mean, like, visions?” Clarke asked slowly, measuredly, doing her best to allow the subject the proper gravity it necessitated.

“Some might call them that, yes,” Lexa answered just as precisely, her expression growing distant as she seemed to get sucked into the recesses of her own mind. “But no Commander has ever truly known why we’re all connected in such a way — nor, often, what or who it is we’re actually seeing. We know the bibliographical history of every Commander to have sat upon the throne in Polis, but nothing of written history nor verbal lesson from a Fleimkepa can prepare one to see inside the mind of another human being — and it is often impossible to know from whose perspective we’re looking. Visual cues or names are one thing, but some memories are just too...obscure to understand, if that makes any sense.”

Clarke nodded for a moment, mirroring Lexa’s far-off gaze as her mind ran through every biological scenario she knew of that might explain such a phenomenon — and came up nill.

Truth be told, it was legitimately the most baffling thing she’d ever heard.

“And...how do the Fleimkepas explain it?” Lexa cocked her head to the side a little, grimacing expectantly as she glanced at Clarke — anticipating her reaction, no doubt.

“Well,” Lexa began, every bit as hesitant as she was exasperated, “as you might imagine, such unexplainable phenomenons have a tendency to become...exaggerated in the hearts and minds of those enamoured with them. So, one might say it is something of a...religious experience for them to interpret the visions of various Commanders and document them as proof of their lore, or what have
you… Everything that every Commander has learned about what’s going on in our own heads comes from the Fleimkepas and their records --,

“Including the bit about the Spirit ‘choosing’ the winner of the Conclave, I’m guessing?” Clarke finished for her, warranting immediate confirmation from Lexa. They were nearly to the center of the village at this point, but Clarke could’ve sworn they’d been standing completely still for minutes now…

Utterly dumbfounded, Clarke could only nod. Her eyes searched the distant horizon in front of them, a hundred thoughts zooming past her mind’s eye and quickening her heart rate with excitement and intrigue. Lexa simply watched her all the while, expression somewhat peacefully resigned in the ideology that’d been her foundation -- a foundation that didn’t seem to hold much weight in any other aspect of her life or tenure as Commander.

As Clarke turned them down a sidestreet, a thought suddenly struck her:

“Do all Nightbloods experience these visions? Or do they only begin once the Conclave has finished?”

The question stopped Lexa in her tracks, her brows pulling together as she looked at Clarke as though she’d just suggested that gravity was a hoax. She stood there, silent and bewildered, for what felt like solid minutes before returning to herself, looking as though she’d come alive for the first time in days.

“That is a question I cannot answer, but one that I intend to resolve the moment we step back inside the walls of Polis,” Lexa stated confidently, excitedly, eyes suddenly burning with a thousand possibilities Clarke had just given her. “I am sure Titus will be delighted in my taking interest in what he has to say for the first time since he’s known me.”

Clarke laughed happily at that, relishing in the idea of Lexa pestering that wooden post of a man for any reason at all.

The street they ambled down was quiet now, not a soul in sight as the sun continued to set, and it was almost easy to forget the conundrum that lay in waiting for them back at the cabin -- all of those faces looking to the two of them for answers neither could even begin to conceptualize. Clarke felt a sudden intense yearning to draw out this moment with Lexa, enjoy the ease and bliss of her company during this rare intermission.

She reached out and intertwined her fingers with Lexa’s, taking the other girl by surprise as she drew their bodies together to shield their indiscretion. To Clarke’s surprise, Lexa went with it immediately, shimmying her shoulder a bit so that her cloak blocked the view of their hands from behind, their close proximity obscuring all other angles.

If only for a moment…
“If we’d grown up together -- on the Ark, let’s say -- do you think we would’ve been friends?” Clarke asked somewhat quietly, meeting Lexa’s affectionate gaze with tenderness of her own.

Lexa smiled ever so beautifully at the question, eyes becoming hooded with the depth of her devotion as they flitted from Clarke’s eyes to her lips at an appreciative pace. She looked away for a moment, chewing at her bottom lip and gazing up at the sky in a way that sent heat coiling in the depth of Clarke’s stomach -- one of the most delicious feelings a person could have the luxury of experiencing.

“Well, to start, where do I live? And how do we know each other?” Lexa asked earnestly, playing along as she continued to gaze up at the sky with Clarke watching her.

“Alpha Station -- same as me. We’ve got Earth Skills and history together.”

Lexa’s smile widened, making a grand expression of contemplating what such a scenario might look like. Clarke couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt so warm.

“So, we are just cohorts, then…,” Lexa mused, swiping her thumb absentmindedly across the back of Clarke’s hand. “I was an exceptionally well-read student, you know -- always minded what I was told and came prepared with the Fleimkepa’s lessons days in advance.”

“I’m sure you did,” Clarke smirked crookedly, earning a nudge from Lexa as they turned a corner down another side street. This street was even more secluded than the last, nothing but the sides of buildings for a solid chunk of yards and an old sewage covering in the middle of the road towards the end of the block.

“Regardless, I am sure a version of myself who existed on your ship amongst the stars would’ve been completely enamoured by the wonder that is Clarke Griffin. Especially had I been around you for so long.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Mm. I don’t think I could have resisted you in any lifetime. I am far too drawn to you for my own good.”

That was it for Clarke. She stopped Lexa in her tracks and spun her so that their torsos were fitted together as they were always meant to be. Both girls found themselves breathless in the wake of the motion, utterly and completely lost to the other’s cause.
Clarke was pressing forward to capture Lexa’s lips in her own before either of them could take a
breath. The kiss was like a building action -- the stoking of sparks to flame as hands knotted in hair
and bodies were drawn closer. It was the kind of kiss that Clarke didn’t know how she’d lived
without, the kind that makes onlookers feel as though they’ve stepped into a private moment so
intimate that their very presence is a violation.

They broke apart far sooner than either of them cared to, though, remembering their surroundings
and themselves as reality drew them back down. Clarke groaned somewhat lasciviously, staring
pointedly at Lexa’s lips as she caught her own beneath her front teeth. Lexa sucked in a sharp breath
at the sight, ever-susceptible to the charms of her love.

Clarke took both of Lexa’s hands in hers as she began to walk backwards, slowly but surely moving
them towards the end of the street as Lexa’s eyes followed her every movement. She dropped their
hands, making a show of twirling and strutting a bit as Lexa laughed joyfully, utterly transfixed.

They were nearly to the end of the road now --

CRASH!

Suddenly, there was nothing beneath Clarke’s feet but air as the sky fell away from her -- or, rather,
as she fell away from the sky.

“CLARKE!!”

Darkness encompassed her surroundings as her feet flew from under her and her back slammed into
what felt like solid pavement. She gasped for air in the darkness, completely disoriented as Lexa’s
voice sounded in panic from some far off distance now.

Clarke sputtered and choked, unable to see more than an inch in front of her as her eyes struggled to
adjust to total darkness.

“CLARKE!! Can you hear me? Are you okay? Clarke!! ”

“I-I’m f-fine, Lex,” Clarke sputtered back, struggling with every ounce of her being to re-orient
herself. “Just...gimme a sec --,”
“I’m coming down --,”

“No!” Clarke cut her off immediately, struggling to sit up as her body protested every movement. “I don’t know if there’s a way back up. We can’t afford to have both of us stuck down here without a way out.”

Speaking of which, where was she? One minute, she’d been walking backwards down the street, the next --

*The sewage covering.*

Blinking a few more times, Clarke’s eyes finally cooperated enough for her to crane her neck up and, sure enough, her eyes locked onto the perfectly circular opening a good few feet above her head. The covering had clamoured down into the hole beside Clarke, and she’d neglected to notice what with the sound of her own belabored breathing.

Lexa’s head and shoulders obscured half the opening, her face framed in bright light making her expression indiscernible as she stared down at Clarke.

“No ladder, but Lex… I don’t think this is a sewage drain.” The light above her head expanded as Lexa adjusted her position, sliding slightly backwards to allow more light to come through to Clarke.

“What do you mean, hodnes?”

Clarke attempted to take a deep breath, her lungs protesting from having the wind knocked out of them, and tried not to let the prickling at the back of her neck overtake her. Something wasn’t right here…
“It’s like… there’s no water, and it smells... musty -- not like anything you’d expect from an ancient plumbing structure or storm drain. I don’t know…,”

“Can you see how far it goes?” Lexa asked immediately, growing more on-edge with every passing second Clarke spent down there. Clarke shook her head, momentarily forgetting herself as she took a couple of steps into the tunnel, doing her best to see what was in front of her.

“Clarke...,” Lexa called warningly, clearly not okay with losing sight of her love in the black abyss.

Suddenly, an idea struck Clarke.

“No idea, but do me a favor -- toss me a rock. I want to see something…”

Lexa hesitated for a moment, clearly uncomfortable with the idea of leaving Clarke alone for even a second. After a moment of painful consideration, though, she finally acquiesced, disappearing quickly and allowing the full amount of light to pour into the underground -- not that it helped much.

Clarke’s initial assessment had been correct; the pathway was seemingly endless in both directions, neither a light nor ladder in sight. It sent a chill up Clarke’s spine to see the vast, dark endlessness, the prickling at the back of her neck morphing into full foreboding as she felt herself on the verge of some huge discovery -- some centuries-old secret that instantly felt far larger than herself.

Yet another puzzle piece to add to the mix, even more out of place than the rest of them…

What was this place? How old was it? How had it come to be? Was it still in use? Better yet -- what was it used for, and who was using it?

A word with Hakan was definitely in order --

“Here,” Lexa called down to her, re-appearing at the entrance to the drain and reaching her arm down into the hole. Clarke moved to stand beneath it, holding out a hand to catch the rock as Lexa let it fall.

The next moment, Clarke tossed it will all her might into the darkness, waiting with bated breath until it clattered against something hard an untold number of yards into the abyss. The clamor echoed for a few seconds before fading into silence.

“Just like I thought -- there’s no telling how far this thing goes. It might not even be the only one either, like there could be a system of tunnels --,”
Her own words pulled her up short, sending an intense shiver down her spine as Lexa called her name. It couldn’t be, could it?

The kidnapper had always seemed to appear out of nowhere and then vanish all the same -- footprints disappearing aboveground and everything…

“-arke? Are you --?”

“Holy shit, Lex -- that’s it!!” Clarke exclaimed, taking a couple of steps back so that she was directly beneath Lexa whose expression she still couldn’t discern. “This is how he’s doing it! The kidnapper -- he’s using tunnels!!”

Lexa fell dangerously quiet for a few moments, clearly thrown by Clarke’s conclusion as the two of them stared at each other.

It didn’t make any logical sense -- was it really possible that such a sophisticated system of underground pathways extended through every clan territory without anyone ever having noticed them? It shouldn’t have been possible, but maybe that was exactly why it had worked so well…

Why would anyone pay attention to a bunch of 100-year-old sewage drains no longer of any use to the new civilization that’d arisen atop the ruins of the one that came before it? Besides, the Grounders had never had much use for tunnels -- or bunkers, for that matter -- preferring land or water travel to conduct all matters of state and trade. If anyone had fallen into one of these tunnels by accident like Clarke had done, they probably just… well, died there, frankly. Without anyone to pull them up or watch their back.

“How is that possible?” Lexa asked after a while, barely more than whispering as she sounded entirely stunned. “One would have to have mapped the entirety of these tunnels and where they let out to a precise degree --,”

“And anyone who had the tools and wherewithal to do so would most definitely have an advantage over everyone who passed them off as old plumbing.”

“But, how do we know this isn’t just a fluke structure? How do we know this tunnel doesn’t just end in a few miles or so?”
It was a good question, and one that would most assuredly determine whether or not this was a viable lead, but Clarke couldn’t help the feeling in her gut that told her this was the start of something far bigger than either of them could comprehend.

“Well, I suppose we don’t know that, but what other lead do we have?” Clarke shot back, settling her hands on her hips as Lexa shifted restlessly above her. “How else do you explain how a person could just... appear out of nowhere -- to an exceptionally accurate degree -- do their bidding, and disappear without a trace the moment anyone gives chase? Unless they were no longer aboveground…”

Lexa considered this for tense moments more, leaving Clarke to shift restlessly from one foot to the other as she contemplated.

One thing was for certain, though: she needed to speak to Hakan. If nothing else, he could at least confirm that he had no prior knowledge of these tunnels or, if that wasn’t the case, he could point her in the direction of answers to this seemingly unsolvable new conundrum.

Why had she never noticed any of these drains before? Was every sewage drain in the 12 clans actually an entrance to a hollowed out, endless system of tunnels? How had no one ever bothered to see what was beneath their feet?!

*I mean, you should know -- you very frequently overlook the obvious when it’s directly in front of your face…*

Perhaps the most important question of all remained: *where did these tunnels lead?*

“You could very well be onto something,” Lexa spoke up finally, startling Clarke slightly as she did so. “If you are even the slightest bit correct, it means we need to get you out of those tunnels right now --”

Before she could finish, Lexa’s voice was overtaken by the distant murmurs of a number of other voices that sounded from somewhere aboveground.

“*Heda?*” Anya’s voice called from afar, louder than the rest. Lexa immediately whipped around to look over her shoulder. “We were just looking for you and Clarke, I -- what’s going on --?”

“Here -- come quickly!!”

Clarke began to zone out as their heated exchange filled the entrance to the tunnel, the small group of them immediately determined to get Clarke out of there. They very quickly settled on something of a
human ladder for which Anya, Bellamy, and Echo would bear the brunt of Lexa’s weight and hold her legs while she went down to retrieve Clarke.

As the rescue mission commenced, Clarke couldn’t help but be immersed in the hundreds of questions and theories now swirling around in her mind. Even as Lexa locked on to Clarke’s hands and the two of them started to rise towards the darkening sky, Clarke couldn’t keep a single burning questions from sticking at the forefront of her mind’s eye:

Where do these tunnel lead, and who do they lead to?

---

“I… I had no idea.”

It was seemingly the only thing Hakan could think to say, surrounded by Clarke, Lexa, Raven, and the rest of the crew as they all crowded his hospital bed.

“Your father never hinted at anything -- no underground pathways…?”

“Never,” Hakan responded to Clarke immediately, shifting uncomfortably in his hospital bed. The hall was quiet save for the sound of Raven’s incessant rustling with the map she’d insisted on bringing with them upon learning what’d happened. “We have always prided ourselves on our waste disposal and water treatment facilities -- none of which utilize the old systems that we all thought to be obsolete or irreparable.”

Clarke nodded, receiving confirmation for what she’d already suspected.

“And no one’s ever fallen in like Clarke did?” Raven pressed, eyes still glued to the map as she scanned every inch of it.

“I suppose they could’ve, but they might not have lived to tell the tale.” That drew Raven’s eyes up, her lips pressing together in discontent as she stared at Hakan.

“How will we know where the tunnels lead?” Anya spoke up after a moment, hands situated on the bed frame near Hakan’s feet. “Or, for that matter, if they lead anywhere at all?”

“Or if we’re even going in the right direction,” Echo added, gaining a nod from Anya.
“Easy,” Raven retorted immediately, glancing around at the lot of them with a smirk spreading across her lips. “We pick one of the tunnel paths that starts inside the city -- assuming there’s more than one -- and follow it as far as it can go closest to the trajectory into the wasteland that I’ve already drawn up. Once we reach a spot where the tunnels intersect with my coordinates, we might have ourselves a ballgame."

“And if we don’t?” Lexa spoke up for the first time, having remained uncharacteristically quiet since the time they’d regaled the rest of their group with Clarke’s harrowing fall. “What if we follow the tunnels twenty miles into the wasteland, as you would have us do, and there is nothing but ruins and debris above empty tunnels? What then? Or, alternatively, what if they do lead somewhere and we end up in another trap?”

Raven’s face immediately fell, her smirk turning to a hard frown as she sighed heavily. She shook her head after a moment.

“Truth be told, I hadn’t gotten that far… But, this is the closest thing we’ve had to a tangible lead in days -- even more than what we had when we left Polis! You can’t seriously believe it’d be better for us to sit back on our haunches --,"

“Faced with no concrete connection between this latest piece of evidence and the rest of the information we’ve gathered so far, that is exactly what I believe,” Lexa stated firmly, her tone hardening to counteract Raven’s obstinance. “We are dealing with any enemy that possesses skill with advanced weapons and knowledge of an underground system of travel that none of us even knew existed until less than an hour ago. We are tired and many of us wounded by the last sneak attack we were lured into… Following a half-lead into a territory that none of us is familiar with towards an enemy that has been three steps ahead of us since the very beginning is the definition of a bad idea.”

Raven physically shrank into herself at the admonishment, finding her place once more in the face of the Commander’s authority -- and, frankly, logic. Clarke was conflicted, torn between potential red flags of proceeding to plan as articulated by Lexa, Anya, and her mother from the jump, and spurred on by Raven’s and Bellamy’s excitement about finally having what they perceived to be a major lead.

(There was also a child-like part of her that simply wanted to explore, follow the tunnels of a society long-gone into the unknown just for the sake of saying she’d done so, but Clarke would never admit to that side of herself if asked.)

“That’s not entirely true, Heda,” Hakan said quietly, nearly whispering as he dared to break the tense silence. He gulped immediately upon having the Commander’s gaze bore into him. “It’s just that...my people -- we’ve been running reconnaissance into the wasteland for decades. We’ve only ever covered a 12-mile radius along the border, but --,”
“It’s better than nothing,” Bellamy finished for him, looking incredibly pleased with himself as he patted Hakan on the shoulder. The boy tried not to wince.

“ Barely…,” Clarke mumbled, shaking her head as she chewed her bottom lip. She caught Lexa’s eyes for a moment, the two of them sharing a weighted look as the rest of the room waited restlessly.

It was slight, but Clarke caught the smallest of movements intended for her eyes only -- the tiniest of nods. Permission to go with her gut above the Commander’s authority…

“If I may, Commander -- why don’t we cover all of our bases here? Send one team led by a member or two of the Plain Riders’ reconnaissance group to take half our people to Raven’s coordinates, while the other team takes the tunnels. Once we map the distance between entrances and figure out how far the tunnels go, the aboveground team can start uncovering the drain holes and light a pathway for the tunnel team to follow.”

“That could definitely work,” Raven chimed in immediately, the color somewhat returned to her cheeks as she adjusted the map in her hands. “We’ve got a few solar flashlights and ration packs in our supply kits -- the tunnel team can use them in the underground --,”

“What about the fact that we have no idea what kind of situation we’re walking into?” Echo spoke up suddenly, shaking her head in bewilderment as her eyes traversed the group. “If we’d all take a moment, we might recall that a bunch of us just got slaughtered by these child-snatching tunnel-walkers not two days ago! Also, what happens if and when Raven’s calculations lead us absolutely nowhere and we have to come back here to lick our wounds? What then?”

“Then I suppose we’re back to square one,” Clarke responded quickly, moving to walk around the crowded bed and place her hand on her advisor’s shoulder. They locked eyes for a few moments, Echo slowly shaking her head as she communicated every ounce of foreboding she could.

“But, everything we’ve done since we left Polis has been a risk -- not to mention all of the things we did before that… This planet is a risk, one that all of us have been fighting for the right to keep taking. If we continue to sit here and do nothing -- hell, even pack our things and go home -- we run the risk of more of us being slaughtered where we stand for as long as we keep allowing this enemy to blindside us. The longer we wait, the fewer choices we’ll have -- and the fewer soldiers…,”

Echo closed her eyes for a moment and hung her head, forcing deep breaths into her frame as Clarke rubbed a healing circle in the space above her shoulder blade. She understood her advisor’s sentiments exactly -- felt them in every inch of her body -- but she also knew that they were running out of options.

And time, ever of the essence as it was.

“Queen Clarke is right, and I find myself of changed mind,” Lexa admitted after what felt like hours of thick silence. “Having a split team to run the route and cover all ground appears to be the best option we have -- and the only possible lead we can feasibly follow at this point. I will designate
personnel first thing in the morning, and we will set off by high noon in the direction of Raven’s calculated coordinates both aboveground and in the tunnels. Hakan will appoint aboveground navigators. Understood?”

A chorus of “Sha, Heda” echoed through the hall, the group immediately dispersing to head to their respective cabins with pre-mission jitters already setting into their side conversations.

“A moment please, Heda,” Hakan called to Lexa, the girl already halfway to the main doors of the hall with Clarke and their respective advisors trailing her heels. She stopped immediately, turning back to face him.

“I’d like to lead the aboveground team myself -- if you’ll allow it, of course.” Lexa immediately cocked her head to the side, lips pursing and brows pinching as she grasped her hands behind her back.

“You have been seriously wounded and are nowhere near healed, Hakan. I am not sure your father - -,”

“My father is dead,” Hakan cut her off coolly, swallowing his nerves as he met the Commander’s gaze on him with steel, “and I am the de-facto heir to the Chieftain. No one knows our borders better than me, and I’ll have my horse to get me to safety quickly if things go wrong… Please, Heda -- let me help you.”

Clarke looked from Hakan to Lexa, utterly torn. On the one hand, the boy was seriously wounded, and Clarke felt personally responsible for both his injuries and recovery -- especially with his father’s parting words to her still weighing so heavily on her chest. On the other, he did know these lands better than anyone…

“Fine -- I will allow it,” Lexa finally agreed, eyeing him gravely as he seemed to deflate with relief. “But you will double your guard and ensure that a chain of command exists in your stead should anything unexpected happen out there. Am I understood?”

“Sha, Heda -- thank you.”

The next moment, Lexa was spinning on her heels and continuing on her trajectory towards the door, Clarke and company close behind.

As they stepped into the crisp night air, Clarke couldn’t help but shiver a little -- in anticipation or actual chill, she couldn’t be sure. All she knew was that this was the first time she’d felt a semblance
of hope in weeks, and the possibility of being able to reunite those kids with their families… Maybe it wasn’t the actual act of reunification, itself, but the prospect of being able to do something morally righteous for a change that had her so worked up -- to bring life back as opposed to ending it.

It meant more to Clarke than she could adequately articulate, and all of this was starting to feel far too close to a second chance for anything good to come of it...

Lexa fell into step beside her as they made their way toward Clarke’s cabin, their fingers brushing at intermittent points as they snuck knowing glances at one another. They had one last night of bliss ahead of them, and neither intended to waste a single second of it.

And, then --

A journey into the unknown started anew.

Chapter End Notes

hey kids! hope all is well with you guys. i know it’s been a minute, but what can i say? life has a way of putting itself first at all times lmao.

it was a super plot heavy chapter, and i did my best to introduce the concept of the Flamekeeper lore in a way that does justice to my origin story -- which does not, in any way, include the Flame/chip or City of Light, i might remind you.

hope you all enjoyed!! stay frosty.
Wasteland Walkers and Tunnel Runners

Chapter Summary

Recap:
After facing yet another series of dead-ends, Clarke takes a walk through New Dakota to try and clear her mind. Lexa soon joins her, and the two of them do their best to re-capture lost time as they imagine the beautiful impossibilities of a childhood together -- that is, until Clarke goes tumbling into a sewage drain in the middle of the street. Upon discovering that the drain is actually a passageway -- one that the kidnappers very well could be using to accomplish their dark deeds --, Clarke convinces Lexa and the others to explore the pathway and what it might lead to. Beginning their journey to the unknown yet again...

Chapter Notes

a second update?? in less than two weeks?? from ME???

TW: lots of violence and mentions of blood

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I should be in those tunnels with Octavia. We don’t know what’s down there, and --,”

“And she can take care of herself,” Raven interrupted Bellamy’s anxious rambling, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder as they rode. “Besides, she’s not alone down there, and I highly doubt Lincoln, Wells, or even Thomas would let anything happen to her.”

Though she kept her mouth shut, Clarke couldn’t help but agree; the party in the tunnels was well-equipped and stacked with talented fighters, and they had the advantage of only having two possible angles from which to face an attack. The aboveground group, on the other hand…

Well, let’s just say it might as well have been open season for them.

She glanced over her shoulder at the village retreating from sight, heart rate quickening at the thought of leaving her mother and Maya behind with only a handful of warriors to protect them and the entire
town. Clarke had to remind herself that it was she who was actually in the most danger at this point -- but at least she knew how to use a weapon.

Her horse clomped steadily over the slowly-receding grass, taking her further and further into no-man’s-land as the heat of the high-noon sun warmed her back. Echo rode easily beside her, the two of them sharing a look as their caravan proceeded on.

The group rode in a line of pairs, two Plain Riders leading the pack with Hakan and his personal guard riding close behind. Lexa and Anya comprised the third row, the two of them rigid and alert as they swayed with their horses. Clarke and Echo were next, Bellamy and Raven behind them as two Plain Riders brought up the rear. The formation was tight and carefully ordered, no fewer personnel than necessary but with the skill to outmatch entire armies.

(Lexa had refused to allow any more of her personal guard to accompany them, ordering the skilled swordsmen to stay behind and help protect New Dakota -- and also to prepare in case anything happened to the Commander, but Clarke didn’t want to think about that part.)

The tunnel group was much the same: four Plain Riders evenly dispersed amongst a group of Lincoln, Octavia, Wells, and Thomas. Lexa had determined that more were needed up-top to balance out the 360-degrees of possible attacks, allocating a healer for each group -- Wells and Clarke, respectively -- and making sure the navigators were well-versed in the plan.

(If anyone questioned why the two most quintessential leaders of the bunch were grouped together, the official answer was that the aboveground team faced a greater number of possible threats, which meant that skill was needed to accommodate risk level accordingly. A select few knew the true reason…)

Earlier that morning, Clarke and Lexa had been awakened to the sound of Raven’s excited rambling about her latest discovery: a tunnel entrance near the central square that would all but lead them right to her calculated coordinates. It was all entirely too convenient -- her accidental discovery turning out to be a perfectly reasonable route to their end destination --, but Clarke forced herself to ignore it. The kidnappers were using the tunnels to sneak in and out of the clan territories; of course one of them would lead to the next point in the predetermined path.

Of course they would -- wouldn’t they?

From there, a small group had trailed behind Raven as she marked each entrance that led in a straight line from that central point, taking them all the way out to the border. The mechanic had calculated roughly 50 to 75 yards between each entrance, spaced alternatively between every second covering, the precision with which they were situated quite baffling to them all.

After a tense morning meal in the cabin, the lot of them had proceeded to the central square where Lexa had assigned their groups and allowed Abby to dole out supplies accordingly. Each person got several days’ rations, a change of uniform, and as many weapons as they could carry -- only a couple of guns for those who knew how to use them. Solar flashlights went to the tunnel crew, with a
couple left over for the ground crew just in case, and the designated healers received tailored first-aid kits courtesy of Abby’s discretion.

The tunnel team was to check in every two entrances, shining one of the solar lights in a repetitive manner until a member of the wasteland walkers confirmed their group’s status. Both groups were to remain on the offensive, accepting up front that they were traversing relatively blindly into unknown enemy territory to an unknown endgame at full and complete risk to their individual and collective mortality. Clarke supposed that’d been the terms and conditions for most days on Earth since the last apocalypse, but seldom did it feel as impending as it did in their current predicament...

In the most ideal scenario, though, Clarke hoped that Raven’s coordinates might lead them to some sort of outpost for the kidnappers -- whoever they were -- that might contain intel on where it was they really needed to be heading and what they should expect once they got there. With that information, they would hopefully be able to retreat back to New Dakota to rest up and determine their next steps.

It seemed like a relatively standard mission, but Clarke knew that, with her luck, they’d end up scattered and relying on their rations by the end of it all.

She supposed she should also cross optimism off her list of virtues...

Parting ways with Abby had been... rough, to say the least.

The woman kept trying to convince Clarke to stay behind, to help her continue caring for the wounded and protect the rest of the village -- but it had been a short-lived conversation. Both of them were nothing if not creatures of duty and, like mother like daughter, they would carry their responsibilities until it most likely brought about the end of them both.

Clarke had always known where she’d gotten her tendency to veer towards relentless self-destructiveness from.

It still felt like a hollowing in Clarke’s chest to watch the woman grow smaller on the horizon, though, both Griffins burdened by all the things yet left unsaid between them -- things that were, perhaps, better left to silence at this point. Truth be told, Clarke had never been particularly good at finding the time to lay her cards down on the table for anyone else to see (well, anyone besides Lexa, that is). Was there ever a proper time to tell the person who’d raised you that they’d done more wrong than right? Or, worse, to reveal the blood that soaked your hands and stained your skin, forever altering their perception of you?

Regardless, if there was one lesson she had taken from her time indentured to Queen Nia, it was that, in order to survive, one need only act -- out of fear, outrage, protectiveness, responsibility, love, or any combination of the above. There was no use rationalizing, analyzing, or justifying; at the end of it all, the only person one need have answered to was themselves.

Had Clarke mastered this lesson? Hardly. She was just about the most self-loathing and guilt-ridden human alive, prone to constant over-analyzation and justification of her own actions. Still, Nia’s teachings almost felt like a twisted antidote to the haze of confusion that overtook her whenever her mother was around -- that odd, almost-childlike instinct that told her to lash out and behave out-of-character simply to spite the woman. The need to punish the one whose love had only ever been conditional despite having promised unflinching acceptance and bone-deep understanding...
If it weren’t for Lexa and the way she loved Clarke -- the way that Clarke loved her --, Clarke wouldn’t have known any such love existed.

“What do you think is out there?” Echo asked thoughtfully, sounding far away as she brought Clarke out of her revery. “It can’t all just be... this, can it?”

Clarke re-focused on the scene in front of her, sucking in a sharp breath upon discovering what Echo was referring to: seemingly endless miles of dead, dehydrated earth nearly greyed out by the lack of anything living beneath or upon its surface. The horizon was flat for infinite miles before them, leveled both naturally and not by substances far more powerful than any of them as it stretched in every direction, dead as the day it’d been killed.

It was only then that Clarke noticed the sound coming from beneath her horse’s hooves -- the unmistakable crunch and crack of plastics, metals, and all manner of debris. In fact, most of the ground around them was littered with it, interrupted only by the odd carcass of a tree long-dead or a patch of malignant soil possibly uncovered by wind or erosion at some point in the past.

The sight of it sent a wave of nausea rushing over Clarke, her hands balling into painful fists gripping her horse’s reins as she motioned for the creature to proceed more carefully. It was absolutely befuddling that none of the man-made debris had degraded more effectively over the past century, but slightly less heart-wrenching as she thought it could’ve been. Deep down, she’d always believed mankind’s mark on this planet would cut far deeper than any of her ancestors could’ve calculated or foreseen…

“You all didn’t think a group clean-up would be in order at any point in this past century?” Raven quipped sharply, directing her displeasure at one of the Plain Riders soldiers behind her. “Like a trash-gathering day for friends and family? Or even a charity trash-picking day for all the little asshole kids to participate in -- you know, like organized child labor --?”

“It is not our prerogative to remove the remnants of the society that came before us,” the elder soldier, Seq, answered evenly, long dark tendrils whipping his face in the wind. “Besides, this land is neither ours nor the Commander’s; it is the Earth’s, and Earth shall do with the land what it pleases... If it wishes to leave this land to rot and waste so that we may be reminded of the true nature of humanity and our capacity for self-punishing destruction, so be it.”

Clarke watched as Raven narrowed her eyes in indignation, never one to accept any sort of “spiritual mumbo-jumbo” as a reason for complacency or ignorance. Seeming to decide against an argument at this particularly unpleasant moment in time, though, Raven simply turned her back to the warriors, rolling her eyes in Clarke’s direction.

“That’s an awfully well-articulated way to shirk off responsibility, isn’t it?”

“Shut up, Raven,” Bellamy grumbled, shaking his head as he looked out over the sea of rubble.

They fell back into a tense quiet immediately after that, the group of them too awestruck to speak. It
was the worst kind of awe -- the kind that raised a mirror to everything they were and could become, had been in the not-so-distant past.

On top of that, the contrast between the pristinely clear blue sky and the dead earth beneath it was…. Well, it was almost dizzying, to say the least.

As if pulled on a string, Clarke locked eyes with Lexa over the girl’s shoulder, the two of them passing all of grief and mourning for their wounded planet between them. They had been sneaking glances and sharing entirely unsubtle looks since the moment they’d mounted their horses, but this was the first time it felt like they truly didn’t care if they were seen.

“I’d always wondered how they’d let it happen,” Echo spoke up quietly, drawing Clarke’s eyes to her as she appeared to be swallowing back tears. “How our ancestors could have looked upon this sacred ground and those who’d occupied it and just... demolished it. Leveled it to little more than nothing in some places.”

Clarke closed her eyes for a moment, fighting back unwarranted emotion as she tried not to picture any of it. They fell into silence for a moment after that, the implications of the words weighing heavily on both of them.

“Have you ever heard of the theory of mutual assured destruction?” Clarke asked after a while, barely audible over the chorus of hooves clomping debris. Echo’s brows furrowed as she shook her head. Clarke thought not.

“It was this evolving hypothesis that a bunch of military strategists came up with -- one that stated that the use of full-scale nuclear weapons by two or more opposing sides would cause complete annihilation of both ‘attacker’ and ‘defender.’ Thing is, complete annihilation of two parties became complete annihilation of all parties once various nations embraced the idea of allied powers… In other words, jomp em op en yu jomp ai op. ”

Clarke was aware of the quiet of eavesdropping all around her, none of the members of her caravan accustomed to the art of subtlety -- not even Lexa in this case.

“After a certain point, it was unclear who was allied with whom, and everyone had become so interconnected that… well, all it would’ve taken was one. One missile, and the whole world ended. Can you imagine?”

Echo shook her head profusely, brows pinching together as her mouth fell open.

“But, why? If they knew that such a thing would happen after the first shot was fired, so to speak, then why fire it?” Echo was nearly incredulous with disbelief.

Clarke could only sigh, pursing her lips as she watched her advisor ponder the same question she’d tossed around in her head hundreds of times on the Ark. The sheer perplexity etched on Echo’s features was like a sick sort of validation for all of Clarke’s own anxieties about the past.
“We never really got a reason,” Bellamy chimed in after a moment, shrugging a little as he looked out over the wasteland. “It was always some vague and disappointing one-liner about ‘international tensions leading to irrational action,’ …”

“Which I always thought was a crock of shit,” Raven added flatly, earning a hum of agreement from Bellamy.

“It didn’t help that everyone who’d survived the initial destruction and trip to space was either suffering from post-traumatic stress or dropping off like flies from survivor’s guilt… Doesn’t bode well for dictating historical details, does it?” Clarke nodded affirmatively at that, having heard her fair share of rants courtesy of Jake Griffin over a number of years growing up.

Her father had loved history almost as much as engineering, and the fact that the materials available to them on the Ark -- what little their predecessors had been able to gather in their haste to evacuate the planet -- were so lackluster and brutally unfinished left a perpetual thorn in his side. As Jake always used to say, they were all doomed to suffer from a lack of hindsight into what had gone so wrong that their ancestors had resorted to outright destruction over any semblance of diplomacy.

“One thing’s for sure -- they did one hell of a job destroying things down here,” Raven stated, shaking her head as her gaze wandered over the ruins. “I mean, it’s hard to even be sure what here was… Do you think we’ll find any… bodies?”

Clarke shook her head immediately, glancing over her shoulder at the wide-eyed mechanic as she spoke.

“Highly unlikely. From the looks of it, anyone who’d been in this part of the country during the bombs would’ve been completely pulverized. Even near the edge of the fallout zone -- where we are now --, the corpses still would’ve decayed more rapidly due to how high the radiation levels were.”

“Doesn’t rule out the chances of there being a couple moldy old corpses down in those steel-lined tunnels, though, does it?” Raven shot back quickly, brows quirking as she appeared genuinely curious.

Bellamy, on the other hand, paled immediately, swallowing visibly as he stared down at the ground - - clearly picturing his little sister encountering such a sight. Clarke scowled at Raven for having done that to him.

“Do corpses even mold?” Echo half-whispered to herself, only just loud enough for Clarke to hear. She shrugged, desiring nothing more than to change the subject.

“Here, Heda!” Hakan exclaimed. “The next entrance!”
Their caravan halted immediately, as they’d been instructed to, holding back for the two line leaders to dismount and remove the sewage covering.

As they did so, Clarke glanced back at Bellamy, watching as he strained his neck to try and see around the group to catch a glimpse of where his sister was. They waited for a tense couple of minutes in complete silence, nothing but a soft breeze to disturb the eerie quiet all around them.

Finally, mercifully, Clarke watched as a washed-out light blinked against the dark inner rim of the tunnel entrance, feeling herself exhale as she heard Octavia’s voice ring out into the afternoon air:

“All clear down here!”

Bellamy audibly sighed with relief, the entire group seeming to deflate as they were momentarily cleared of danger yet again.

With each entrance they passed, Clarke wanted to allow herself a small reprieve, a moment of calm, but it simply wouldn’t come as the Plain Riders re-mounted and spurred the group on once more.

They rode in that tense intermittent silence for hours more, Clarke nearly keeling over every time they checked in with the tunnel team. They were moving far more slowly than any of them would’ve liked, but the Plain Riders insisted that they were traveling as fast as they could without wrecking the horses’ hooves on the debris.

Raven, for her part, had taken to asking exceptionally detailed questions about the land: Why hadn’t the Plain Riders’ lands been ruined as much as this territory? Did they ever consider the risk they were taking by farming on such irradiated land? Had they really never seen the “tunnel creeps in cloaks” before?

She’d received mostly silence and huffs of exasperation, but she pushed on regardless. Clarke knew that it was a coping mechanism the mechanic employed whenever she felt helpless or overwhelmed, but she didn’t dare say anything.

It was self-serving at best; annoyance was one hell of a distraction…

“If my numbers are right -- and I know they are -- we should only have three entrances left until we reach the coordinates,” Raven informed them, earning a nod of confirmation from Anya in response. The two of them shared a look, daring anyone else to intervene as they conversed silently.

For the life of her, Clarke still couldn’t figure out exactly what was going on between the two of them. She’d thought they were together -- could’ve sworn they’d been so for quite awhile -- but every time she’d tried to get a concrete answer from either Anya or Raven, she got redirected. Their chemistry and connection was undeniable to any casual observer, and they were far too protective and possessive of one another to be platonic, but Clarke figured the two women far too stubborn to actually declare anything official between them.

They were nothing if not independent -- even of each other.
“What are the chances there’s an air-conditioned bunker waiting for us?” Bellamy asked gruffly, swiping his long sleeve across his forehead where his shaggy hair stuck to it, wet with sweat. He scratched irritably at his beard, personifying the same restlessness they were all feeling.

Though the air was mild enough, the afternoon sun beat down on them with tangible force, intensified by the amount of metallic and reflective surfaces all around them -- not to mention that they were all covered nearly head-to-toe in the heavy protective gear of their respective clans.

(Clarke didn’t think she’d ever get used to the sight of Raven and Bellamy in Trikru gear, just as she suspected it was hard for them -- and Lexa -- to see her in the uniform of Azgeda.)

“I vote water break,” Raven chimed in after a moment, making a point of re-tying her hair in the band she wore to get it off her neck. Bellamy hummed in agreement.

“We’ve been drinking water as we go,” Clarke pointed out, glancing back at Raven who groaned in response. “If you need refills, we’ve got plenty in our supply packs.”

“Not to be used too liberally,” Lexa called back to them, always listening. She snuck a wink at Clarke, who grinned happily, before turning back to face forward. “We must stay prepared for all possibilities.”

“Yes, Commander,” Raven and Bellamy responded in unison -- if slightly begrudgingly --, passing a canteen between them as they continued to ride.

---

The sun was down near the horizon now, the light golden and blinding all around them.

If she had to guess, Clarke would’ve estimated they’d been riding for about 8 hours straight at this point, only stopping for minutes at a time to feed and water the horses. Regardless, it felt like barely more than a few minutes had passed since they’d left the boundaries of the Riders’ territory, time hiccuping between conversations and blurring together in the bleak silence of the dead landscape.

Sure as hell a long time to keep one’s heart rate up so high...

Suddenly, Hakan held up his fist to stop their caravan.

They halted immediately, waiting with a collectively held breath as he and his guard dismounted and made to pull the next drain covering off. As expected, every second felt twice as long as it should’ve, every breath twice as hard to draw as they waited for the light.
They waited, and they waited some more -- noticeably longer than any of the previous interludes they’d had to endure before. Bellamy was physically uneasy on his horse, shifting the creature from side to side beneath him as he ran his hands through his hair and adjusted his body countless times in the saddle.

When the sun proceeded to light its last for the day, Clarke knew there was something wrong.

After all, the tunnel team had only ever been a couple minutes behind them this entire journey, and they’d more than doubled that as they’d sat there waiting.

Acting on instinct, Clarke swung her leg over the side of her horse and dismounted, clomping onto the barren ground beneath her. All heads swiveled towards her as she did so, each pair of eyes glued to her as she handed her horse’s reins to Echo and walked towards the hole in the ground.

A much heavier pair of boots made their footprints in the dirt only moments later, Bellamy following suit as he set a determined pace opposite Clarke.

“Queen Clarke?” Lexa asked evenly, doing her best to disguise her full-bodied unease in front of her subjugates.

Clarke turned to meet her gaze mere feet from the entrance, pouring as much reassurance into her expression without giving too much away. Lexa was hidden beneath the Commander’s war paint and calm, but Clarke could see the edges of her expression burning through the moment their eyes met.

“Just having a look, Heda. They shouldn’t be taking so long…”

“I’m going down there --,”

“No,” Clarke cut Bellamy off, grabbing the fabric between his shoulder blades and yanking him back towards her as he made for the tunnel. “Not a chance in hell. We stick to the plan at all costs -- that was the deal we agreed to before we left New Dakota. Nothing’s changed.”

“Nothing’s --?” Bellamy sputtered, completely aghast as he stumbled back a step and gaped at her. “That’s my sister down there, Clarke!! You can’t just expect me to stand here while she’s --,”

“That’s exactly what I expect you to do,” Clarke interrupted him, crowding his space to level him down as she held her ground. “My friends are down there too, you know -- I hate this just as much as you do. But we knew this wasn’t going to be a fucking nature stroll; something always goes wrong when I’m involved.”
Bellamy closed his eyes for a moment as he exhaled slowly, doing his best to bring himself back down. She could see him fighting the slightest of smiles at that last bit.

“Just...give it a minute, alright? I’m sure there’s a perfectly reasonable explanation for this –,”

“Guys! GUYS! Look!!” Raven shouted in alarm, pointing frantically towards the western horizon.

Every head in the group snapped in the direction she was pointing, all of them tensing expectantly.

Clarke felt the blood drain from her face the moment her eyes locked onto an object speeding towards them from far off in the distance. Dirt and debris formed a massive cloud in the object’s wake, ominous and foreboding as both raced towards them at impossible speeds.

“Is that...a rover?!”

“Too small to be a rover, and going way too fucking fast,” Raven fired back immediately, already off her horse and hurrying to unburden it of saddlebags. “And, from the looks of it, fully-equipped with turrets -- which means we need to get underground now.”

Lexa responded immediately, firing off orders as their entire party dismounted and worked as quickly as they could to free the horses of extra weight.

The two Riders bringing up the rear volunteered to guide the horses back to their border, already decided upon that course of action before the Commander could even ok it. In their minds, it made no sense to lose a group of perfectly healthy horses to human crossfire, which seemed reasonable enough given their beliefs.

Besides, if no one was around to send reinforcements for whoever was left alive, what was the point of all this?

Seeing the desperate logic in it, the Commander acquiesced almost immediately as the rest of them scrambled around her.

“Ride as fast as you can and stay low to the beasts whenever possible,” Lexa instructed, grabbing a bag from Anya and throwing it towards the tunnel entrance. “Set them free if you must; your top priority should be getting back to New Dakota and sending for reinforcements.”

She freed her horse and slapped it on the rear, directing it away from the caravan towards the two warriors who sat restlessly atop their horses. Clarke and Echo did the same only moments later, running towards the entrance where Hakan and his guard crouched in waiting.

“Wait a day from the moment you reach your borders; if we are not back by the end of it, bring the
reinforcements. Should nothing but corpses await you at the end of your journey, abandon this mission and ride with your backs to the sun until you find one of my guards -- they will know what to do upon my death. Am I understood?"

"Sha, Heda!"

With that, the two Riders were off, shouting commands at the newly-freed horses as the group of them took off far more quickly than they’d come.

Clarke looked back towards the western horizon, heart dropping into her stomach as she processed how much ground the vehicle had gained in the last minute.

“Move -- now!!” the Commander shouted, by Clarke’s side in the next moment with an urgent hand situated on the small of her back. They shared the quickest of looks, the smallest of lines forming between Lexa’s brows in an expression that positively wept with dread for the briefest of moments.

Clarke simply shook her head, hardening her own features as her lips pressed together, willing herself to be strong for the strongest person she knew.

They were not dying here.

As they crowded the tunnel entrance, the Commander began her instructions, every trace of her moment of weakness gone now as she ordered Hakan’s guard into the tunnel first -- the brace upon which his chief would fall. The rest of their group remained silent and tense, barely more than breathing as they awaited their cue from the Commander.

Hakan’s guard situated himself on the edge of the entrance, plunging into the darkness without hesitation. They heard a resolute thump in the darkness, immediately followed by confirmation that the soldier -- Talako -- was ready to receive Hakan.

Clarke rushed to the front of the group to put her arm around the injured boy’s waist, helping him towards the edge as he did his best not to grimace. The next moment, Hakan was taking a deep breath, steeling himself as Clarke helped him over the edge.

He fell into the darkness and landed with a grunt, his own body shielded from direct impact by Talako’s. They called up that they were ready for the next person, and Lexa ordered Bellamy and Raven down next. The two of them complied immediately, getting underground as quickly as they could before Lexa ordered Clarke and Echo into the tunnels.

Clarke didn’t have time to argue, knowing that any time spent wasted on words would only mean less of a chance that Lexa and Anya would get down to safety.
With one last fleeting glance at the vehicle hurtling towards them across the wasteland -- well within range of them now, so why wasn’t it firing? -- Clarke launched herself into the tunnels, free-falling for milliseconds before colliding with something slightly more giving than concrete.

“You’re welcome, your majesty,” Bellamy quipped, rumbling voice bouncing off the walls as he placed her on her feet with a crooked smirk.

Clarke didn’t think she had the heart to smile in response, so she settled for shoving his shoulder as he made to catch Echo. She stumbled forward in the darkness until she met another body, feeling a semblance of warmth in her chest when Raven’s arms wrapped around her in the tightest (and briefest) of hugs.

Clarke turned back towards the tunnel entrance, feeling relief wash over every inch of her as she watched Lexa drop down into Bellamy’s arms. The Commander blinked profusely, attempting to adjust to the sudden darkness and immediately searching for Clarke, who turned up at her side the moment Bellamy put her down.

She pulled Lexa away from the dim light and the group as Anya came down, nearly tackling her love in a hug that was reciprocated fiercely. They pressed their foreheads together for a few seconds, breathing together as their pulses raced.

“That’s the last of us, Commander,” Bellamy called to them, moving away from what little light the entrance allowed at this time of day with Anya and the last two Plain Riders in tow.

Lexa traced Clarke’s lips with the pad of her thumb as her fingers caressed the soft skin of Clarke’s cheek, saying everything she couldn’t speak before the two of them separated and re-joined the group.

Out of nowhere, the loud rumbling of a powerful engine shook their surroundings, forcing all of them to sprint away from the entrance with only the couple of bags they could grab as they tripped over themselves. Familiar with common sense, though, each of them hugged the walls as tightly as they could, doing their best to obscure any chances of getting nicked by a stray bullet as they hurtled into the abyss without a light -- something they hadn’t the time to risk looking for at the moment.

Bellamy and one of the Plain Riders -- Hotti, Clarke thought his name was -- fell back to bring up the rear, each of them guarding Clarke’s and Lexa’s flanks as they ran on. Clarke could barely hear anything above the roaring of blood in her ears, conscious only of controlling her own breathing and keeping her footsteps as quiet and steady as humanly possible as they ran blind.

Despite the fact that she knew Lexa was on the opposite wall, Echo somewhere in front of her, and Bellamy directly behind her, Clarke had never felt more like she was running full-speed into one of the most elaborate traps in human history all by her lonesome. After all, this entire excursion had been off of her discovery, the overarching mission something of a passion project that she’d roped Lexa into pursuing in the first place.

Sure, it was in the Commander’s interests to see to it that a string of organized and targeted kidnappings was answered for, but Clarke couldn’t help but wonder if they’d gone about everything the right way -- or if there even was a right way in all of this mess of clues and dead-ends…
Suddenly, Clarke got the strangest impression that they were running slightly downhill --

“They’re not following us,” Bellamy huffed between breaths. “Why aren’t they following us?”

His words struck her somewhere deep in the chest, co-mingling with her other suspicions and pulling her up short as she slowed her pace. Not more than a second later, Bellamy was barreling into her, the two of them making all manner of unflattering noises as they toppled to the concrete.

“What’s going on?” Lexa called out immediately, speaking as loudly as she could to be heard above panting breaths. She sounded further off than Clarke would’ve expected. “What’s happened?”

“Well --,” Bellamy grunted, wheezing a little bit as he rolled away from Clarke, “it would appear that the queen decided on a brisk walk --,”

“They wanted us down here,” Clarke interrupted him, springing to her feet and searching for Bellamy’s hand to pull him up with her.

Her mind was whirring at what felt like a million miles per hour now, providing her mouth words to speak before she could even process what they meant. “They could’ve started gunning us down at any point after cresting the horizon, but they didn’t... They knew we wouldn’t risk staying out in the open against those turrets, so my guess is they waited until we were close enough to the entrance to feasibly make it into the tunnels before they showed up -- make it look like it was our idea… Why else would they have idled at the entrance like that other than to keep us from coming back up?”

“But then, why massacre us in the valley like that a couple days ago?” Echo spoke up, sounding much closer than anyone else besides Bellamy at this point. “Why go to the trouble of picking us off in the first place if they really just wanted to lure us out here? And, how did they even know we’d come here to begin with? That’s one hell of a long shot…”

“How have they known anything up until this point?” Raven answered immediately, seemingly multiple steps ahead of them already as they all struggled for breath in total darkness. “Why does every single thing they’ve done -- every single clue they’ve left -- feel like it’s led all of us, specifically, to this point? Because it has; they’ve been a hundred steps ahead of us this entire time, plotting our moves before we could even make them -- manufacturing a crisis driven by every parent’s deepest fear -- all so we could get here. It doesn’t make any sense to me right now, but… it’s the only logical explanation I have. Don’t even try to ask me why.”

They all stood there in strained silence for moments upon moments afterwards, trying to fit the pieces together in their own minds as it continued to dawn on them how utterly screwed they were. Raven’s
synopsis made sense in that sort of desperate, adrenaline-backed conclusion sort of way, but...

From almost the very beginning -- the moment when Clarke had learned the kidnappings were happening in a geographically-particular and precise pattern, to be exact -- every single clue down to the most minute of details felt far too... contrived to be as random as the masterminds behind it all had certainly intended. As bleak as it was to admit, Clarke should’ve allowed things to click within her mind a bit sooner -- ignored the puzzle pieces for the actual picture it was meant to show, in a way.

Clarke couldn’t fault herself, Lexa, or anyone else in their party for not seeing what was right in front of their faces all along, though -- especially when none of them could figure out the why.

*We’ve all spent far too long on the defensive for our own good... Who knew “survival mode” could actually wind up getting someone killed?*

“When you say ‘we’ were meant to get to this point...” Echo began, daring to break the thick silence as she swallowed against the quiver in her voice. “How do we know which of us ‘we’ actually comprises of? Which of us they actually want... alive?”

Yet again, Clarke found herself utterly stricken, feeling almost faint at the idea that some of them could have pre-written death sentences hanging over their heads without the slightest idea of who some might be.

Before Clarke could begin a downward spiral toward the answer, though, a loud click resounded in the space around them, all of them audibly startling as a light flickered on. Sure enough, Raven had found one of the spare solar flashlights in the pack she’d managed to grab before they’d sprinted away from their only semi-light source, illuminating the scene before them in an unsettling blue-ish cast.

Clarke looked for Lexa instantly, the two of them locking eyes like magnets on strings within a second. Lexa almost visibly deflated before Clarke, obviously relieved to have her love within sight once more. They swayed towards each other instinctively, closing the distance between them slightly as the rest of their group attempted to adapt to the light.

Raven pulled another flashlight out of the bag Anya held up for her, the two of them sharing weighted glances as the mechanic rustled through the bags’ contents. Clarke looked to Bellamy and Hotti in the next moment, hardly surprised to see a pretty significant scrape down Bellamy’s cheek where he’d taken the brunt of their fall only moments before. Hotti, for his part, looked almost in shock as his childlike eyes darted between every member of their group, appearing somewhat sickly where strands of his long dark hair stuck to the sides of his face with sweat.

“To answer your question, Echo,” Raven started, drawing all eyes to her, “we don’t know, and we don’t need to know, ‘cause these bastards don’t get to decide which of us is expendable -- got it?”

Echo nodded despite looking wholly unconvinced, watching with the rest of them as Raven began to pull objects from deep within both bags she now had Anya holding.
“We might be playing their game, but that doesn’t mean we have to play by their fucking rules.”

The next moment, Raven pulled out what was unmistakably two standard-issue handguns from the first bag, handing one off to a baffled Echo and tossing the other to a suddenly-ecstatic Bellamy. She pulled out a handful of clips in the next moment, divvying them out between the two of them as everyone else watched.

“Even though we’ve barely got enough ammo for a herd of cattle, I packed ‘em just in case -- better than bringing a bunch of knives to a machine gun fight, eh?”

Raven pulled out another much larger gun -- a semi-automatic, from what Clarke could tell -- and stared at it for a moment, working her jaw as the rest of them waited. After a moment’s delay, she held it out for Bellamy, motioning for him to hand the glock over to Clarke and nabbing the other from Echo, who looked just as well not to be holding it anymore.

“That feels better -- remember how to use it?” she asked Clarke, tossing her a clip.

Aware of the eyes on her, Clarke quickly loaded the clip into place and checked the safety, nodding once. She looked up after a moment, immediately meeting Lexa’s gaze on her as the Commander raised an inquisitive brow, eyes darting from Clarke’s to the gun.

“We all got rudimentary gun safety courses up on the Ark -- just the basics of loading and aim… Doesn’t feel as reassuring as a sword, though.” Clarke winked mischievously at Lexa, who averted her eyes from the group to avoid revealing her affections too plainly.

“Right then,” Raven cleared her throat after a beat, shuffling one of the supply packs onto her shoulders as Anya did the same. She looked to every face in the group, momentarily pausing to smirk at Bellamy’s newfound delight at having something other than a sword in his grasp.

“Like I said before, we’ve got limited ammo, so don’t be stupid. We shouldn’t be far from the coordinates now; in fact, I’d estimate we’re less than a hundred feet out, so look alive. Who knows what we’ll find…”

Clarke looked to Bellamy, whose expression was momentarily cloaked in shadow as he seemed to remember the reason they’d taken such a long pause by that tunnel entrance to begin with. She empathized greatly with him in that moment, swallowing back the lump that lodged itself in her throat the longer she let Wells’s, Lincoln’s, and Thomas’s faces linger in her mind --

“Heda!” Taloko called out, somewhere near the front of the group and clearly in distress.

Clarke followed closely on the Commander’s heels as they made their way to them, doing her best not to wince at the sight of fresh blood seeping through Hakan’s uniform above his wounds. The chief was slumped against the wall of the tunnel, eyelids squeezed together as he gasped through the pain, seemingly on the verge of unconsciousness.
“The running, it -- I do not know if he can make it much further…”
Clarke knelt beside the chief, lifting the uniform from his wounds and doing her best not to grimace
at all of the freshly-torn stitches. She waved Anya over, reaching for the medical kit in her pack as
the Commander and Taloko talked quietly. With nothing to clean the wound or numb the pain,
Clarke simply shook her head, wasting no time to thread the small needle in the kit and begin her
work on Hakan’s re-opened wounds.

She knew his condition was bleak when his body didn’t even acknowledge the needle entering his
flesh.

“--stay behind and wait for the reinforcements I sent for. I know your chief felt it his responsibility to
guide us here -- and he will be rewarded handsomely for his service -- but his work is finished. His
only debt is to himself and his people now, and I will not let it go unpaid.”

Taloko nodded gratefully at his Commander’s words, watching as she motioned for Anya to hand
over the bag she was holding open for Clarke while Raven illuminated the scene. Lexa placed it in
her lap, rifling through its contents and pulling out supplies one-by-one.

The two Riders were given rations, a light, and fresh bandages as Clarke finished her handiwork.
She sat back on her heels, worrying at her bottom lip as Lexa rose beside her and placed a gentle
hand on her shoulder. Clarke looked up at Lexa, reassured by a resolute nod as she rose to her feet.

The Commander motioned for Raven to lead the way, the mechanic lighting their path as the group
of them took turns bidding the warriors farewell for now.

“I’ll do everything in my power to come back for you two,” Clarke promised, earning a nod of
respect from Taloko as she turned away from him and settled at Lexa’s flank.

Refusing to allow herself the emotion of a last glance, Clarke fell into step behind Lexa and Raven as
the two of them led the way, the only sound that of whispered goodbyes and the rustling of cloth as
they proceeded into the abyss. Bellamy stepped around Clarke and Lexa to get to the front, weapon
at the ready as Clarke clicked the safety off her own gun. Raven held a glock in one hand and a map
in the other as she looked it over, keeping the solar light between her lips as they walked.

It was after a minute or so that Clarke noticed every sword in their group was drawn, Lexa before
her, Echo beside her, and Anya, Hotti, and Seq -- the last Rider -- bringing up the rear. Bellamy set
the pace, creeping along the sloping pathway with determination and caution fighting for precedence
in his gate.

“We should be coming right up on it…” Raven trailed off in a whisper, shuffling the map into her
gun hand as she grabbed the flashlight from her mouth and held it further out in front of her.

Lexa motioned for their group to hold back, waiting as Raven closed the distance to Bellamy. She
walked a few steps in front of him, completely silent save for the slight rustling of paper as Clarke’s
heart pounded in her ears.

“Holy shit.”
towards the blue light in front of them that was currently obscured by Raven’s outline. The contrast between extreme darkness and solar light played tricks on Clarke’s eyes, causing her to shuffle uncomfortably as Bellamy’s figure suddenly cut into the light as well, waiting for a sign, a cue, anything --

“Well, this is certainly not nothing...” Raven stated, sounding on the verge of fascination as Clarke sighed impatiently, hurrying to get to the mechanic with Lexa right beside her.

As soon as she saw what her friends were looking at, Clarke, too, found herself stopping in her tracks...

At the edge of the light, the tunnel dumped out into a room shaped like a massive concrete cylinder. Just as Clarke had suspected, the tunnels must’ve started sloping further underground, as the ceiling of the room appeared to be much higher than the roughly ten feet of vertical space the pathways allowed for.

Clarke couldn’t see much of anything else besides the general shape of the room, though, everything else shrouded in foreboding shadow.

She and Lexa shared a look, Lexa rotating the sword in her hand as she dropped into a defensive crouch. Bellamy and Clarke took turns loading their weapons, waiting for the Commander’s signal as they prepared to move.

After a moment, Lexa raised her fist, glancing over her shoulder at the poised warriors behind her as she motioned for them to move forward.

Raven quickly stuffed the map in her pocket, positioning her gun above the light as she and Bellamy led the way into the room. The two of them hopped down and shuffled left, making room for Clarke and Lexa to do the same as they flanked the outer wall.

Each person that jumped down was slightly alarmed to find metal grating beneath their feet instead of concrete, the sound of their boots clanging against metal pair-by-pair enough to raise the hairs on Clarke’s arms. The place was utterly silent otherwise.

Seeing the room in its full glory, though, Clarke nearly gasped:

Beyond the relatively thin strip of grating that outlined the circular room sat a command center of sorts in somewhat of a sunken pit, the whole of it situated at the bottom of a short staircase that surrounded the center on all sides. An untold number of screens and switchboards covered every inch of the roundtable at the foot of the stairs, a human-sized break in the table allowing for entry directly across from the tunnel entrance through which they’d come in. Everything was off, not a light alive on the board nor a disturbed chair in sight, and Clarke could tell just by the looks of it that the whole setup hadn’t been used in decades.

Directly opposite where they stood with their backs to the concrete stretched a section of wall stacked floor-to-ceiling by bookshelves overflowing with contents, barely discernible in the singular flashlight’s cast. The shelving appeared to start from the break in the wall that’d allowed them to enter and go all the way around the room until --
“No fucking way.”

The utter disbelief in Raven’s voice had them all swiveling to the left, multiple intakes of breath
cutting through the silent aftermath as they all saw what’d caused her outburst:

*Tunnels.* A series of them -- four in a row, one-after-the-other, starting just beyond where Raven
stood. The entrances were circular and a step up from the grating, just like the one they’d come in
from. Each of them were as pitch-black and terrifying as the one they’d been in, and Clarke found
herself covered in goosebumps at the realization that the only defensible spot in the room was the
very place in which they were currently standing -- the only section of wall from which there would
be no surprises --

“Bell?”

The weak voice came from somewhere in the room, immediately causing their group to poise for
attack as they searched for the source.

“O!!” Bellamy shouted, weapon at the ready as he broke rank to search for his sister, pivoting every
which way. Raven darted the flashlight around the room as quickly as she could, doing her best to
spot the girl. “Where are you, O --?”

“Here!” Raven yelled, settling the flashlight on the third tunnel entrance where a pair of eyes
reflected back at them.

Bellamy bounded over to his sister, uncaring of noise as he swung himself up and into the tunnel
weapon-first. Clarke was immediately on his heels, feeling Lexa on hers as she shouted for the med
kit from Anya who tossed it to her immediately. There was just enough room for Clarke to swing up
into the tunnel next to Bellamy, the two of them settling on either side of Octavia’s legs where she
lay sprawled just inside the entrance. Lexa remained on the grating, pivoting from side-to-side as she
raised her weapon to guard their six.

“What happened, O? Are you alright? Where are the others?” Bellamy fired off, hands darting from
his sister’s face to her torso as he searched for wounds.

Raven held the light up for Bellamy who took it in his free hand and swung the gun on its strap until
it smacked against his back. He gasped at the sight of his sister in the light, pale and covered in blood
with cuts and bruises all over her face -- one of which was working to swell her left eye shut as
blood dripped into it.

“W-where are you hurt, O? Can you show me --?”
“Not...all my blood,” Octavia managed through a gasp, shifting a little as Clarke lifted the shirt of her uniform. She was right; the girl was covered in nothing but bruises and superficial cuts.

“Most of it’s...Lincoln’s.” Clarke swayed back on her heels at the words, feeling a wave of nausea overtake her as she attempted to swallow back rising bile. “They...shot him...in the shoulder… Wasn’t dead.”

Clarke exhaled slowly at that, glancing at Bellamy as he swiped a shaky hand across his sister’s forehead, wiping filthy tendrils of hair from her face.

“Where is he? And where are the others?” Clarke pressed after a breath, placing a gentle hand on Octavia’s shoulder in the attempt to ground the girl to consciousness. Octavia blinked rapidly as she tried to focus on Clarke, clearly beaten within inches of her life.

“T...OOK them,” she wheezed, coughing a bit as Bellamy fumbled for a water flask in Anya’s supply pack. “They took them… Left me behind… It’s a... trap.”

Clarke and Bellamy shared a heavy look, Clarke glancing over at Lexa who simply flexed her jaw, unphased.

“We know,” Clarke replied defeatedly, swiping a few stray strands of Octavia’s hair away from her face as Bellamy held the flask up for her to drink. “They lured us down here -- probably knew we’d come looking for you guys anyway --,”

“Clarke, see if there’s another light in that bag, will you?” Echo interrupted her, coming up beside Lexa while Clarke started rifling through the pack. “Anya and I are going to do some digging over there.”

Clarke nodded, grasping onto their last solar flashlight and handing it over.

“Stay close, and watch each other’s backs,” she instructed her advisor, who bowed her head in compliance. “Hotti, go with them.”

Clarke turned back to Octavia as the Rider followed Echo and Anya over to the bookshelves, watching as the girl gulped some more water down. Bellamy was crouched protectively over his sister, glancing over his shoulder into the darkness of the tunnel every now and then.

“That put chills down Clarke’s spine almost instantly, thrown by just how quiet someone would have to have been to sneak up on Lincoln …
“They clubbed us all over the head to disorient us, then started just... beating us. We tried to run, we tried to fight, but --,” Octavia swallowed noisily, blinking back tears now as she opened her eyes and stared at her brother in agony. Bellamy looked absolutely stricken for her. “They had guns with silencers on them, and we had fucking knives ... One of the Riders, Jo, got shot in the back trying to get away, and Lincoln...h-he took a bullet to the shoulder trying to get one of them off of me, and Thomas --,” she clapped a hand over her mouth, shaking with sobs as her brother wrapped her in his arms, doing everything he could to steady her through the pain.

Lexa’s hand came to rest reassuringly on Clarke’s foot as they waited for the anvil to drop, the two of them sharing silent tragedies as Octavia attempted to catch her breath.

“O-one of the men...w-was aiming at Wells --,” Clarke gasped, feeling Lexa’s hand tighten around her foot, “a-and everything was so chaotic... The light was on the ground and no one could see, a-and Thomas... he just -- he jumped in front of the bullet. H-he didn’t even hesitate, he just... jumped.”

Clarke’s own hand went to her mouth, shaking her head as Bellamy groaned mournfully into his sister’s hair. Octavia locked eyes with Clarke above Bellamy’s shoulder, shaking her head a little as she sobbed.

“He’s gone -- Thomas is dead... They killed him. They killed him and took his body with them...”

Clarke braced her hands on her thighs as she fought the waves of grief -- and nausea -- crashing over her. Lexa’s hand remained tight on her foot, the girl’s presence ever-calming despite their circumstance as they sat there for a few moments, mourning to the sound of Octavia’s cries.

Before Clarke could process any of it, though, Octavia was speaking again, apparently determined to say her piece as Bellamy held her:

“They dragged all of us here so quickly I thought my cheek might’ve gotten scraped off on the concrete,” she sniffed, separating from her brother as she kept hold of his hands. “Then they just... left me here, completely in the dark -- took everyone else and disappeared --,”

“Through which tunnel?” Lexa asked immediately, eyes darting from one tunnel to the next as Raven began to pivot with her gun. Seq had his sword drawn at her flank as they guarded their Commander.

Clarke leaned back to peer around the tunnel entrance at where Anya, Echo, and Hotti stood across the way, rummaging through the bookshelves and tossing its contents to the floor with little care.

“This one, the next one, all of them -- I don’t know honestly,” Octavia shook her head, eyes darting between her brother’s and Lexa’s as she began to tremble slightly. “I couldn’t see anything, and I --,”

“How long ago was this?” Clarke interrupted her, her hand coming back to brace against the girl’s shoulder. Octavia met her gaze with the one eye growing more swollen by the second, blinking rapidly as she attempted to think. She took another swig of the flask in Bellamy’s hands before she spoke.
“Couldn’t have been more than a few minutes ago, but it’s so hard to tell down here --,”

“Heda!” Anya called suddenly, drawing all of their attention over to her as she continued, “Come quickly -- you need to see this!!”

Lexa immediately jogged over to her general, drawing Clarke down out of the tunnel with her as Raven and Seq remained with Bellamy and Octavia.

Anya was holding a book open with her eyes glued to one of the pages, shaking her head in utter disbelief as she handed the book over to Lexa. The Commander took it gingerly, brows immediately pinching together as Hotti held the light for her to read.

“It appears to be some sort of log, but notice the name here --,” Anya’s slender pointer traced a line on the page, eyes darting between it and Lexa’s face as she watched for a reaction. “Becca Franco.”

“Bekka Pramheda,” Lexa breathed in shock, locking eyes with her general as the two of them shared in their bewilderment. “The first Commander… but, how? I’ve never seen anything like this before…”

“I couldn’t get very far into it but, from the looks of it, it is all about her life from Before -- something I have never heard any Fleimkepa even mention --,”

Anya’s words became something like background noise as Clarke’s eyes suddenly locked on to something behind the general’s head -- the spine of a book that looked all too familiar…

Clarke stepped past Lexa and Anya, stretching up to her tip-toes as she removed the book from its place on the shelf. Echo was busy reading the various spines of the books a couple of steps away, otherwise oblivious to her surroundings.

Clarke turned the book over slowly in her hands, opening the cover and flipping the first couple of pages, the strings of memories left untied pulling at her…

No title. Pencil sketches…

The first picture depicted what Clarke believed to be Times Square in New York City before the bombings, teeming with life to the point of gross overcrowding. The next few sketches were all quite similar -- snapshots of life in the city before the end, immortalized on the old pages for all to see…

Five people on a hillside overlooking a valley, watching as a nuclear bomb made a mushroom cloud of some far off place…

Another valley, run wet with blood and littered with the remains of corpses and ruins in shambles. The same five people watching as the blacked-out woman faced them --
Clarke nearly dropped the book, feeling all the blood draining from her extremities as the hair on the
back of her neck stood to a point. Every instinct within her screamed at this discovery, completely
and utterly mortified at what was either some cosmic-level coincidence or something far larger than
she could ever comprehend.

If this was the written history of the Grounders -- their “folklore,” as Lexa had described it -- then
what the hell was it doing down here? If no widespread knowledge existed of these tunnels, then
how could it be possible that a copy would wind up in this room, of all places? Unless the copy had
been stolen --

“Bellamy, what did you say the name of that storybook was called? The one about the shining city?”
Echo called to him, pulling a book from the shelf as Clarke remained frozen a few steps from her,
utterly paralyzed.

“I didn’t,” he called back quickly, peeking his head out from around the tunnel entrance as he spoke.
“If I’m remembering correctly, I think it was called --,”

WHAM!

Out of nowhere, Bellamy was suddenly flying backwards out of the tunnel and onto the grating,
tumbling down the steps and smacking into the roundtable with impossible force, his gun clattering
off somewhere beside him...

And suddenly, everything turned to chaos.

Octavia screamed for her brother -- who’d apparently been kicked back by a boot to the face --
quickly silenced by a blow to the head from a figure clad in all black who knocked her out of the
tunnel. He wore what looked like a gas-mask obscuring his face, jumping down onto the grating as
he stalked his victim.

Snapping out of her momentary shock, Clarke dropped the book and raised her gun, firing off two
quick shots into the figure’s chest and mask as he stumbled back in shock. He collapsed back against
the tunnel entrance almost immediately, limbs settling into odd angles as he appeared to breathe his
last.

Clarke didn’t have time to celebrate, though, feeling dread and ice settle into her veins as masked
assailants started pouring in through the tunnel entrances one-after-the-other, all armed with what
appeared to be guns, but not firing -- why aren’t they firing?!

Lexa darted out and bounded across the grating to slice the right arm off of one of the men appearing
from the tunnel their group had come in through, spinning low and taking his feet with her as she did
so. The man flopped to his back, strangely not making a sound as Lexa plunged her sword into his chest and twisted. She then proceeded to take out the next man with a clean slice just above the shoulders, soon joined by Anya who had already taken out two more on her way over to the Commander.

The two Trikru women kept their backs pressed together, forming a two-headed machine as they dispatched one man after another, barely breaking a sweat.

Hotti and Seq took the next tunnel, slicing and stabbing with brute force as Echo and Raven defended the next two entrances, sword-swinging and gun-firing. Octavia was crawling towards her brother now, Bellamy struggling onto his elbows as his face appeared distorted with blood, his gun a couple of feet from him.

It was only then that Clarke noticed that Raven and Anya had thrown their lights on opposite sides of the grating, providing them just enough light to work with in this underground last-stand...

Clarke stood with her back to the bookshelf, firing off shot after shot at various cloaked figures as they continued to pour into the room. She made sure to hit the assailants in close range of her friends, never going too long without checking on Lexa --

All of a sudden, a realization struck Clarke like a kick to the chest, dawning on her like a bucket of ice water to the scalp:

The cloaked figures weren’t fighting.

Clarke watched as they hopped down onto the grating one after the other, guns strapped across their chests with gloved hands at the ready, and simply stepped forward to die. Between all the grunts and yells of her friends -- and the blood rushing in her own ears -- Clarke hadn’t even noticed that none of the men were making sounds as they were chopped, sliced, and shot all to hell. The gunshots were making work of all of their ears, rendering it impossible to discern where sounds were coming from in the enclosed space.

Plus, it hadn’t even occurred to Clarke how eerily similar in build and stature every single one of the assailants was -- almost like they were the same person --

“STOP!!” Clarke shouted, her ears ringing and roaring with the continued sounds of close-range battle. “STOP FIGHTING!! STAND DOWN!!”

Lexa was the first to respond to the sound of her voice, of course, pulling her blade out of one of the assailant’s chests and sprinting over to Clarke. She placed her hands on Clarke’s shoulders, eyes wild as they darted over every inch of her.

“What is it, Clarke? Are you hurt? Are you --?”
“No, Lexa -- look!!”

She turned the Commander back towards the fighting, the two of them watching as each of their friends finished their latest kill and lowered their weapons with painful hesitance. Every pair of eyes in the room darted restlessly from face-to-face, bewildered and breathless as things slowly started to quiet, all of them maintaining their defensive stances.

Sure enough, Clarke had been right; the moment her friends stopped attacking, the assailants simply froze in place. Those that were waiting to enter the cylindrical room stopped on the edge of the tunnels, silent and waiting for their cue to proceed again.

“What the fuck?!?” Raven exclaimed, ramming the figure closest to her in the chest with the butt of her gun and watching as the man swayed backwards slightly before correcting. He came back to stand at silent attention only a moment later, making no move to retaliate.

“They’re not fighting?!”

“They’re not even *human,*” Octavia stated, holding up an amputated arm from Echo’s vicinity and holding it up for all to see in the pale blue light.

Instead of blood and severed extremities beneath the cloth armour were *wires* -- tens of them, some still sparking from where they’d been disconnected from their host. Clarke hurried over to the head Lexa had severed, picking it up in her trembling hands and ripping off the mask to reveal a faceless silicone head, the dome of its “skull” an extinguished piece of hardware -- more sleek and complex than anything Clarke had ever seen.

“We were fighting a bunch of fucking *robot clones?!”” Raven yelled, kicking the dismembered bot nearest her feet and slamming her gun into the concrete wall beside her.

“But the flesh felt so... *real --,*” Anya breathed, barely more than a shaky whisper as she stared down at the creatures in white-faced horror. Clarke shook her head in muted shock, struggling to find coherency as she spoke through a scratchy throat.

“I’d say that was the silicone, if I had to guess --,”

“Silicone, and some absolutely *insane* engineering skills.” Raven interrupted Clarke, crouching down to examine the chest of one of the clones. “I can’t even believe this shit... *Real life automatons *--,”
“If they weren’t fighting,” Bellamy rasped all of a sudden, allowing his sister to pull him into a sitting position on the stairs, “then what the hell was with the boot to the face?!”

“To make us attack,” Clarke replied immediately, eyes glazing over as everything started to click into place within her mind. “To get us fighting and tire us out -- make us waste our bullets…”

“It didn’t help that we couldn’t see anything,” Octavia added, examining her brother’s face as blood continued to pour from his presumably broken nose. “Just how many bullets did we waste?”

“I’m down a clip and a half,” Raven responded immediately, not taking her eyes off the automaton in front of her. “Which means I’ve got one and a half left.”

“I’m just about the same, give or take a couple bullets,” Clarke stated bleakly, slightly surprised at how many bullets she’d managed to use in such a short amount of time.

She met Lexa’s gaze on her then, the two of them reflecting similar expressions of bewilderment and alarm.

“And we played right into it --,”

“Indeed you did.”

The voice came from nowhere and everywhere all at once, rumbling all around them and shaking the grating beneath their feet as they startled. Guns and swords were poised at the ready instantly, each of them pivoting in various directions in the attempts to locate the source.

“I’ll admit -- I’m impressed. You’re smarter than I gave you credit for, Clarke.”

The sound of her name coming from that voice like thunder set Clarke’s teeth on edge, causing Lexa’s defensive crouch to turn protective as the Commander angled her body in front of Clarke’s. Though her back was turned to Clarke, Lexa’s fury positively radiated off of every inch of her, sending residual shockwaves through Clarke’s system.

“Who the hell are you?! Show yourself, you fucking coward--!”
“Ah, ah, ah -- language, Ms. Griffin,” the voice admonished her, sending yet another set of agonizing chills down Clarke’s spine. “You have no idea the kind of privilege you possess -- the privilege we have granted you.”

Clarke’s brows pinched together as she glanced at Echo, who was a few feet away and looking equal parts befuddled and enraged. Raven, on the other hand, looked like hell’s fury personified --

“Kill the spares.”

Before Clarke could even draw breath to gasp, the sickening sound of a bullet meeting flesh and bone tore through the room, causing everyone to cry out as Seq collapsed to the floor, his face disfigured by the kill shot.

Time seemed to jolt to a standstill in the following moments, Clarke processing the scene before her through what felt like a collapsing tunnel…

A red dot appeared on Octavia’s chest, right above her heart, immediately drawing her brother’s attention from where his eyes had been locked on hers.

“NO!!”

With a guttural roar, Bellamy launched himself into the sight’s path as red turned to green once, and then twice more. His body tumbled onto the steps as he rolled to his back, drawing desperate gasps for breath as Octavia screamed in anguish.

Clarke was running over to him before she could even think about it, Lexa at her heels. She collapsed roughly to her knees beside him, feelings tears stinging her eyes as her trembling hands cradled Bellamy’s head in her lap.

He’d taken three bullets to various vital places along his torso, muscle and organs having stopped them from going through to his sister.

Stunned, heartbroken, Clarke came to the only conclusion that could be drawn:

Bellamy wasn’t going to make it.

Blood began to pool beneath his frame, covering the steps as it soaked down into Clarke’s and Octavia’s clothes where they held him. Clarke brushed the hair from his eyes as gently as she could, painfully in shock as she watched his wide eyes dart from her face to his sister’s, struggling immensely to breathe.
“Hang on, big brother,” Octavia stammered, face contorting in unadulterated torment as she watched Bellamy’s eyes grow more glassy by the second. “Don’t you give up on me -- don’t you dare give up.”

Bellamy shook his head a little in Clarke’s lap, reaching out blindly with the hand in his sister’s lap before she took it in hers, holding it tight.

“My sister…,” he rasped, his chest stuttering as it fought to draw breath, “my... responsibility.”

Sobs wracked Octavia’s body as she bent over her dying brother, burying her head in his chest as her cries shook them all. Bellamy looked up at Clarke as he blinked more slowly now, his lips twitching into the smallest of smiles -- as if to reassure her, let her know it was okay to let him go.

Clarke could barely see through her tears now, struggling to form the words she knew she needed to say.

“In peace...may you leave the shore --,”

“No,” Bellamy choked, shaking his head almost desperately as he looked from Clarke to Lexa where she stood behind them. “Not...that one…”

Clarke looked from Bellamy to Lexa, watching the Commander close her eyes briefly before exhaling a woeful sigh. The next moment, she was crouching down beside Clarke, placing her gloved hand on Bellamy’s cheek as she spoke the words she knew he wanted to hear:

“Yu gonplei ste odon, gona … Gustus will know of your sacrifice here. He is so proud of you .”

Bellamy’s eyes squeezed shut as tears streaked his cheeks, eyelids fluttering unevenly as he drew his last breaths in the wake of the only words he’d ever wanted to hear -- that he’d made someone proud.

Octavia sat up then, tears streaming down her devastated face as she cradled his head in her hands, guiding her brother out of the world -- just as he’d brought her into it...

With one last belaboured gasp and a much softer sigh, Bellamy Blake was free to rest at last.

Clarke slumped back into Lexa, feeling a strong pair of arms wrap around her as she wept soundlessly. Octavia screamed in desolation, her ruinous cries the only sound save for the reticent sounds of grief throughout the room.
“Leave the girl,” the voice instructed some invisible force suddenly, cutting through their private moment of tragedy with a tone as cold as the grating upon which Bellamy had just died. “We will find some use for her yet… You know what to do now.”

Lexa’s hold tightened on her all of a sudden, forcing Clarke’s swollen eyes up as she locked gazes with her love who simply wiped the tears from her cheeks, pressing her lips to Clarke’s forehead and whispering coaxing words. Clarke allowed Lexa’s hand to guide her head back to the girl’s shoulder, gripping Lexa’s arms like a vice as she watched an aluminum can bounce along the ground until it rolled right up to them.

The next moment, the can was bursting opened, accompanied by the sound of more cans doing the same as a smoky-looking gas shot out of both sides.

The dizziness was immediate, settling into Clarke’s limbs like a leaden weight as she felt Lexa going limp beneath her…

“Ai hod yu in, ai Klark… Always.”

The entire world fell away from Clarke, leaving her drifting into that familiar nothingness, that resolute abyss…

At least we’re together this time… ‘Til the very end.

---

Vibration. Gentle, contained, intentional -- all-encompassing...

It was like a physical hum all around her -- like nothing she’d ever felt before...

Could Lexa feel it, too?

“Their genetic signatures are strong, but we’ll know more once we get them to Lane.”
“Like I said -- I knew these ones would be worthy… They're devoted to one of us.”

“Speaking of which -- take the one with the black blood to start. She’s the key to all of this…”

Chapter End Notes

as some of you who follow me on tumblr might know, i happen to be one of those rare clexas who absolutely ADORES bellamy blake. he's my problematic son, and killing him off... well, let's just say i might've shed a small tear or two writing this last bit. (kill your darlings, right? unless your darlings are clarke or lexa -- then you leave them the fuck alone.) regardless of what y'all might think of him on the show, i tried to give him a justified arc in this piece and its predecessor -- one that would begin and end with him sacrificing himself and everything else he needed to in order to protect his sister. hopefully that came thru a lil bit...

anyways, hope you enjoyed it??! lmao i know it was super dark, but i've been planning these last few chapters and the ones coming up for like 2+ years now, so it's been a lot of fun for me to finally put pen to paper, so to speak. looking forward to continuing on as things keep getting revealed... we're getting somewhat close to the end now.

i'm gonna do my best to respond to comments on this update if you're so inclined to leave one! thank you to any lovely human who is still reading this behemoth of a story <3

cheers, kids.
Chapter Summary

Recap: Upon journeying into the wasteland full of ruins and debris, the group finds themselves saddled with more questions than answers, contemplating the very nature of their mission as they traversed deeper and deeper into unknown territory. Soon, though, they find themselves stuck in a trap, forced underground without their missing friends. After being left with no choice but to follow the tunnels to Raven's coordinates, the group discovers an abandoned command center and four other tunnel openings, finding a lone and injured Octavia amongst shelves full of mysterious books. In the midst of their exploration, swarms of faceless robots surround them, tricking them into wasting bullets before Clarke stops them. A voice then commands the robots to kill the spares, leading Bellamy to take several bullets for his sister that would ultimately cost him his life.

Seeing no way out, Clarke, Lexa and their group can do little more than succumb to the gas that encompasses them, knocking them unconscious and leaving them vulnerable to enemies unseen and forces unknown...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Clarke was freezing.

Not in that caught-in-a-wind-gust-from-the-icy-tundra sort of way, but in a way that called her back to childhood — to times spent huddled in her mother’s sweaters beneath oversized air-vents that blasted her small frame with unnaturally-frigid air.

She startled into a sitting position, fighting hyperventilation as her eyes darted every which way, utterly disoriented.

Well, that explains it...

Directly beside her, a vent blasted air-conditioning into the room at an alarming intensity, adding to the austerity of the concrete-lined cell Clarke appeared to be locked in. She sprung to her feet, getting as far from the vent as she could as she pivoted in every direction, taking her surroundings in.

There was nothing in the room but a metal cot furnished with a pathetic-looking mattress bare of sheets, situated at an angle adjacent to the single point of entry into the room — a metal door without a window or knob, which meant that she was effectively stuck here until some poor soul dared to pay her a visit. The entire space was lit by a single fluorescent panel, sparing nothing of energy nor decor to light the sterile room.

With a slight gasp, Clarke realized that her feet were bare against the frigid concrete, her uniform completely gone as her clothes had apparently been replaced at some point since she’d last been fully
conscious. She now wore a washed-out grey outfit that looked like something out of a television rerun from Before -- like that of a nurse. Her weapons were gone, too, of course.

Scrubs? Who the hell put me in scrubs?

Clarke didn’t have the time -- nor the emotional capacity, for that matter -- to follow the train of thought that would lead past the fact that a stranger had undressed her unconscious body without her consent. Clearly, her priorities had escalated past individual bodily autonomy at this point…

She walked quickly towards the door, examining every inch of it and winding up dumb-founded upon the realization that it appeared to have neither a hinge nor a latch; the entire door was completely air-tight, sealed by some unknown force that left no space for a forced exit. Clarke spun on her heels, walking quickly back to the bed frame and dropping onto all fours. She slid underneath, using what little light she had to feel beneath the surface, searching for anything and everything that could be used as a weapon if broken off.

Coming up absolutely empty, Clarke let her head drop back onto the concrete, feeling the cold draft against her skin sinking deeper and deeper into the fibers of her muscle and bone…

Save for the bits and pieces of conversation she’d managed to catch at various points throughout that unknown time-frame of her unconsciousness, Clarke knew absolutely nothing -- not where she was, how long she’d been there, who had taken her, how they got there, or where her friends were.

Where Lexa was…

What if they’d taken Lexa somewhere completely different than one of these unnaturally silent, air-tight cells? What if she was hours away, completely hidden, and totally lost to Clarke? What if they were hurting her --?

“No,” Clarke ordered herself, speaking aloud for her own good, “don’t even go there… Don’t go there at all.”

It was hard enough to imagine her friends in one of these cells, completely stripped of their clothes and weapons, just as bewildered as Clarke was. Hard enough to imagine Octavia waking up on the floor like Clarke had done, pushing through her disorientation only to land on the life-altering grief of her recent loss.

Bellamy…

Tears pooled in Clarke’s eyes the moment she thought his name, picturing his face as he’d smiled up at her with blood staining his lips, doing everything he could to leave this world with honor. She muffled a sob as another image solidified in her mind, one of his body sprawled cold and limp on the steps in the pitch-blackness of that control room somewhere deep underground -- miles from anyone who might give him the proper burial he deserved --

“Oh, come now -- don’t cry, Clarke.”
The colossal voice came from everywhere and nowhere, just as it had done in the cylindrical control room.

Clarke was out from beneath the bed and on her feet in an instant, poised in a defensive stance as she fought the urge to bare her teeth at her unseen enemy.

“You’re safe and unharmed. What’s there to be upset about?”

The way his voice lilted almost teasingly -- as though this was all a game to him -- sent Clarke’s blood rushing to her ears, her heart pounding as she balled her hands into white-knuckled fists.

“Where am I? And who the hell are you?” Clarke was grateful her voice didn’t sound as unstable as she felt.

The man chuckled lightly from every angle of the room, forcing Clarke to fight the urge to spin around like an idiot in search of the source as he spoke:

“But are important questions, neither of which I’m going to answer at the moment -- bigger fish to fry and all…” Clarke’s brows pinched together at that, finding herself more and more at a loss as the seconds drew on. “But, do not fret; we shall meet in person soon enough. For now, please enjoy the company of your chosen escort -- she’s far better a sight than me anyways.”

Suddenly, the door let out a sustained hiss, startling Clarke back a couple of steps as the man continued to speak.

“Oh, I almost forgot -- play nice, will you? Lest you forget the number of your friends we currently possess…”

Clarke wanted to shout at the smug voice, hurl a hundred questions up at him in between fits of rage and insult, but she was momentarily deterred. Out of nowhere, the door slid open towards her, revealing a much brighter light that nearly blinded Clarke as a silhouette stepped over the threshold.

The woman held a gun pointed to Clarke’s chest, her expression tight over her features above a black jumpsuit and combat boots. The uniform was unlike anything Clarke had ever seen, appearing to fit like some sort of wetsuit but plated around the neck and over the entire torso with some sort of obsidian-colored metal. Clarke was alarmed to note that the woman’s forearms flicked with light, a screen adorning each arm and flashing with indiscernible displays.

“Hands out,” the woman ordered coolly, motioning with her gun towards Clarke’s wrists. Clarke complied slowly, watching with rigid posture as the woman crept toward her cautiously -- clearly expecting a fight.
The woman had black hair shaved down to a buzzcut, her skin dark and free of any imperfections even in this contrast of light. To Clarke’s wonderment, the woman had heterochromia, one eye hazel and the other a foamy sort of green.

Before she could even register what was happening, Clarke found herself in a pair of hi-tech looking handcuffs, a red light blinking slowly and steadily on the metal piece adjoining her wrists. The next moment, the woman was reaching up to secure another metal cuff around her neck, fitting it somewhat loosely as Clarke glared at her, forcing herself not to flinch.

“Try anything, and you’ll be on the ground in three seconds flat.”

“That’s two seconds too many,” Clarke retorted flatly, eyes burning holes into the woman’s face as they fell into something of a staring contest.

The woman had flinched a little at Clarke’s response, but appeared otherwise unshaken as she double-checked the security of Clarke’s restraints. Clarke attempted to peer over the woman’s shoulder, checking to see if any back-up was coming, but she saw nothing, heard no one.

Not a good sign…

“You’re to do as you’re told and walk where I tell you to walk,” the woman continued, positioning herself at Clarke’s back as Clarke refused to turn and look at her. “Step even one toe beyond where you’re allowed, and we’ll see just how fast you hit the ground -- am I understood?”

Clarke remained silent, refusing to allow this stranger even the smallest semblance of compliance. The woman reappeared in front of Clarke a second later with a pair of white sneakers that she’d pulled out of seemingly nowhere, bending to force them onto Clarke’s bare feet without socks.

Of course they fit…

The woman straightened and moved to Clarke’s flank in the next breath, jabbing the barrel of the gun into Clarke’s lower back.

“This should be fun,” the woman mumbled -- more to herself than to Clarke. “Now walk.”

The next moment, Clarke found herself being pushed forward by the gun to her back, stepping deliberately and rigidly towards the door and out of her cell. She paused on the other side of the door, head whipping left and right as she took in the concrete-lined hallway that stretched in a curved fashion in both directions -- almost as though the entire hallway would meet in a huge circle at some far-off point. The entire hall was lit by fluorescent panels that stretched one-after-the-other, providing
only slightly more light than that which was in the cells despite the striking contrast it’d struck before.

The woman jabbed her in the back again, warranting an eye-roll from Clarke as they made their way down the left wing. With a prickling at the back of her neck, Clarke registered every air-tight door they passed, each one alternating in an evenly-spaced pattern down both walls.

Roughly halfway around the giant circle -- if Clarke’s spacial-awareness was accurate -- the two women reached what looked to be a slightly more glamorous version of a service elevator than ones she’d seen in the past. The woman pressed the summoning button, stepping back to Clarke’s flank as they waited for the elevator.

Clarke could feel the seconds creeping by, counting more than a minute that passed them before the rig finally arrived at their floor. As the doors to the windowless box slid open, Clarke narrowed her eyes, feeling more than a little apprehensive at just how little she knew about the place that currently confined her.

The gun pushed her into the tight space, proceeding the woman who held it as Clarke turned around to face the doors once again. What she saw forced her eyebrows up nearly as high as her hairline.

103 floors.

The buttons occupied the entire panel to the right of the doors, currently alight on floor 93 as the woman pressed the button for the first floor -- the top floor, if Clarke had to guess. At the top of the panel above the buttons was a single-line title carved into the metal: Silo 13.

Clarke tried not to let her panic show too plainly on her features, feeling that prickling sensation more akin to knife-points at the back of her neck now.

Where was she? And what the hell kind of structure contained 103 concrete-lined floors? That is to assume that every floor was concrete-lined… And what was this business with the silos? The name of the structure rung a bell -- something from a book on agriculture she’d read way back -- but she couldn’t make the pieces fit.

Yet another clue I have no idea what to do with…

Before she had time to begin a work-through of the fragments currently swirling in her brain without cohesiveness, the elevator box creaked to a halt, the rig having carried them at an alarmingly quick pace to the first floor. The doors slid open to reveal another concrete hallway, this one with a great deal more light illuminating the way.

The woman forced Clarke to move forward, pushing her out into the hall and to the right as Clarke attempted to gain her bearings. This hallway was just as circular as the last -- only, this time, it came to a head a few yards down and forced them in a singular direction to the left. There were no doors
that Clarke could see, and she forced herself not to succumb to the panic coursing through her as the woman walked them down the hallway.

It was dead-ended by a glass door that blocked off some sort of containment facility, secured by a huge metal air-lock a few yards beyond. Clarke watched as the woman pressed the pad of her thumb to a small black screen situated on a thin metal stand just before the glass doors. Chirping upon confirmation of the woman’s identity, the screen turned green and triggered the opening of the glass door. The two of them stepped into the airlock, immediately closed in by the glass as the woman pressed her thumb to yet another scanner.

After a breath, a loud click resounded throughout the airlock, startling Clarke a bit as the steel-lined door swung out and away from them.

Blinding sunlight poured through the widening crack in the door, forcing Clarke to raise her handcuffed wrists to shield her eyes from the onslaught as she felt herself being pushed forward.

Clarke blinked through the harsh light, fighting every one of her body’s warning signals as she stepped out onto a concrete ramp that led straight into the blinding light at a 45-degree angle. Nothing could be seen or discerned beyond the stark contrast of the tunnel against the light as they started up the ramp, but Clarke could already tell that she was in for something far beyond her wildest imagination…

Sure enough, the tunnel spit them out at the foot of a small grassy hill, and Clarke did a double-take over her shoulder as her mind struggled to process what she was seeing:

A slightly lifted mound of earth surrounded the tunnel-like entrance from which they’d just come -- an entrance that led to an underground silo that apparently plummeted some 103-floors deep into the Earth, completely hidden from those aboveground save for the entrance and the slightly raised mound that concealed it on all sides.

Clarke felt her knees tremble at the thought of the kind of planning and engineering such a structure might require, completely and utterly speechless as her mind struggled to compute the feat. Her eyes remained glued to the hidden silo as she felt herself being pushed up the small grassy incline that’d obscured the view in front of them, a thousand thoughts racing through her mind that had her on the verge of passing out.

If that was Silo 13, does that mean that there are... twelve more of these things? How is that even possible? Where are they --?

The woman jabbed her roughly between the shoulder blades, forcing Clarke to suck in a sharp breath as she turned to face forward.

What Clarke saw had her quite literally falling to her knees...
Beyond a series of grassy slopes that rose and fell for roughly a few miles or so in front of them sat a gleaming city atop a much sharper incline, one that stood half as tall as the mountain range that framed the metropolis with snowy peaks and majesty of every natural sort behind it.

The city appeared to stretch for miles in each direction, almost glowing in the radiant sunlight with the amount of light being reflected and refracted from the glassy surfaces that seemed to cover every structure in sight. Towering skyscrapers cut shapes out of the clear blue sky, putting the Polis tower to shame with the sheer height of them -- tens of them, stacked intermittently throughout the city and looming far larger than any man-made structure ever should.

Glass tubes appeared to connect the tallest of the buildings to one another, creating walkways where Clarke could see the faintest outlines of people traveling in both directions. On the ground below, the regimented lines and shapes of roads weaved in a grid-like pattern between and around every building. Sending yet another wave of awe rolling over her, Clarke realized that the automobiles traveling in an organized, systematic fashion along every road didn’t have any wheels -- they were hovering, illuminated by various colored lights that glowed from the underside of the vehicles.

Clarke could also now make out the fact that there was some kind of energy field situated near the halfway point between the ground road and the glass tubes people could walk through -- one that seemed to act like a highway of sorts where the hovering cars could travel at almost indiscernible speeds throughout the fantastical city uninterrupted by pedestrians or other obstacles of the sort.

It was only when Clarke locked onto a couple of massive screens that illuminated the sides of buildings that she realized she was crying. Images and videos of people dressed in brightly-colored outfits of all manner of luxurious fabrics danced and swayed across the screens, taunting Clarke with their smiles and apparent carelessness as the metal handcuffs chafed her wrists.

Though she was sure she was only getting a quarter of the picture of what this city actually held in store for her, Clarke couldn’t help but feel like she’d stepped out of that silo and into another century -- one far more advanced and utopian-looking than anything even the most optimistic of minds could have dreamt up. Everything was pristine, gleaming and radiant in the light of the afternoon sun situated atop a slope of perfect green and --

Suddenly, Clarke felt a piece of the puzzle click into place within her mind:

*A shining city on a hill.*

A literal, sparkling metropolis situated within the curves and grooves of a mountain range…

Clarke felt the realization wash over her like a wave interrupting the draw of breath, causing her to sway on her knees with the threat of unconsciousness as she struggled to process what it meant --
what any of the clues she’d found or the things she’d seen meant.

So, if I’ve got my facts straight, these people -- whoever they are, however they got here, wherever here was -- took a line from a 1980s presidential address and turned it into some hi-tech, utopian reality. In the wake of a nuclear apocalypse, no less --

“Time to move,” the woman stated from off to Clarke’s left, nudging Clarke’s shoulder with the hilt of her gun. Clarke looked over and up at the woman with tears streaking her face, shaking her head in an expression of equal parts confoundment and tragedy.

She wanted the woman to see it, wanted her to get somewhere close to a level of understanding of just how devastating -- in every sense of the word -- the existence of this city actually was to Clarke. The implications of such a place flourishing in this way -- apparently far-removed from the Commander’s domain -- that’d somehow managed to evade both the Grounders’ detection and the Ark’s were just…

Well, frankly, they were just too much to bear at this particular moment in time. Perhaps at any moment in time, if Clarke were being totally honest with herself.

“I know you have questions,” the woman stated after a beat, looking almost uncomfortable now as she stared down at Clarke with a crease between her brows. “I’m sure anyone in your position would… But, I have my orders -- we need to keep moving.”

Clarke was feeling more vulnerable and helpless than she had at, perhaps, any other point in her life - even more so than when she’d first landed on this planet -- which left her with no choice but to comply with the woman’s orders.

Mercifully, the woman moved to grip Clarke’s left bicep, hoisting her up as Clarke’s legs continued to tremble amongst the myriad symptoms of shock she was currently experiencing. Clarke allowed herself to be led by the arm like a child, stumbling blindly down the grassy hill as they made their way to an outpost of some sort at the foot of the hill -- one guarded by a handful of personnel dressed in the exact same wetsuit-like uniform as the woman who currently dragged Clarke along.

They must be a police force of some kind…

The woman stopped roughly 20 feet from the cube-like outpost surrounded by high fencing. Clarke could see that one of the hover cars waited empty and idling just beyond the outpost; it must’ve been some sort of loading place for transport -- like a docking point for prisoners and other precious cargo... What else would explain the lone method of transport and the safe-guarded, singular point of entry?
“Identify yourself, agent,” one of the men guarding the outpost’s entrance called to them, his gun positioned securely across his chest.

“Adeya Clearwater, naming code 6742.”

The guard seemed to accept the call-out, motioning them forward as the woman -- Agent Clearwater, apparently -- pulled Clarke forward with her.

As they got closer to the gated entrance, Clarke’s jaw nearly unhinged at the sight of those faceless silicone automatons dressed in uniform and interspersed amongst human guards. They stood at silent attention beside their less rigid flesh-and-blood counterparts, guns at the ready as they kept their “gaze” trained on Clarke’s approach.

The surges of nausea and terror intensified significantly as Agent Clearwater escorted Clarke into the outpost and up to the hover car. A man with dark hair cropped like Clearwater’s typed something onto the keypad near the bumper of the car, and Clarke watched with widening eyes as the side doors lifted straight into the air, allowing more than enough room for the two women to enter the vehicle without even having to duck their heads.

Clarke was surprisingly grateful that Agent Clearwater still had her by the arm, bearing the brunt of Clarke’s weight now as she shoved the girl into one of the two rows of seats facing the control panel of the vehicle. With a last troubled glance at Clarke’s slumped form, Clearwater settled into the lone seat directly in front of the control panel, keying in some indiscernible commands as Clarke attempted to remain conscious.

She could tell from the tingling in her extremities and the tinny ringing in her ears that she was close to blacking out, intimately familiar with the bone-deep leaden weight that rendered her completely uncaring of the kind of treatment she was enduring -- if only so that the agent wouldn’t make her get up and walk around on her own.

Clarke’s focus was singular now; she needed to stay awake. Everything else -- even, regrettably, thoughts of her loved ones and how they would all escape -- came secondary to the primal survival instinct that now drove Clarke to simply stay above water, so to speak. She couldn’t allow herself to be dragged unconscious into some undisclosed location that she had no visual or kinesthetic knowledge of, no matter how bleak her chances of survival currently seemed…

The next moment, Clarke felt her stomach somersault over itself as the hover car rose even further from the ground, its engine startlingly quiet as Agent Clearwater piloted the vehicle up and up. The instant they hit an unknown level of altitude, a loud *woosh* resounded all around them as that strange energy field appeared out of nowhere and encompassed their vehicle like some kind of a force-field - almost like a huge liquid bubble capturing a much smaller pebble.

Before Clarke could even catch her breath, the sensation of being flung in a slingshot hit her chest like a tangible force, leaving her even further incapacitated as the hover car took off in the strange translucent highway towards the city center.
Although they were moving so fast that their outside surroundings were indistinguishable, Clarke was relieved to find that the motion became almost undetectable immediately after that initial lurch. She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment as she forced herself not to throw up, breathing as steadily as she could while she searched for that inner place of nothingness -- that trained state of numbness that Nia had so ruthlessly beaten into her all those months ago.

She needed that now -- far more than she needed answers to any of her questions -- if only so that she could simply *survive* this ordeal.

*Survive it, and then figure out what the hell is actually going on…*

“I wouldn’t have pegged you as one so...poorly-responsive to air travel.”

Clarke opened her eyes at the comment, narrowing them at the agent while the woman stared right back. The unspoken context of the remark left Clarke feeling surprisingly nonchalant about the fact that these people somehow knew she’d grown up on a freaking spaceship -- because of course they knew. They seemed to know everything else.

Clearwater looked displeased with Clarke’s lack of response to her, clearly battling some prior expectations she’d had of how their encounter would go.

“I was told you’d put up a fight, not that you’d lose the coloring in your cheeks the moment you saw a bunch of skyscrapers.” Clarke rolled her eyes at that one, feeling her irritation driving some of the feeling back into her fingertips.

“And what’d you expect me to do, hm?” Clarke rasped back after a moment, fighting the dryness in her throat as she directed a scorching gaze at the agent. “Throw a punch in your direction so you could taze me a couple times? Real solid tactic that would be.”

Clearwater clenched her jaw, meeting Clarke’s gaze with that conflicted expression muddying her features.

Though Clarke couldn’t quite get a read on the woman, she could tell that there was a great deal of unspoken dissonance hiding just beneath the surface of those flawless features. It provided a sharp contrast to the pristine appearance of her 20-something-year-old face, giving it an undercurrent of emotional poignancy that Clarke couldn’t quite make out.

Despite the fact that there was far more going on in this place than Clarke could ever possibly comprehend, perhaps there was also something she could work with here in the company of this tense and striking agent -- something that could make an ally out of an adversary…
Suddenly, the vehicle slowed to a near-stop, jolting Clarke forward a bit as she looked through each of the many windows around her. Before she could gauge her surroundings, though, the vehicle was entering what appeared to be a steel-lined landing dock attached to one of the ridiculously tall glass towers. The entire space mirrored the pod-like shape of the hover car as it pulled the vehicle in as if by magnetic force.

The car jolted once again, shuddering to a stop as Agent Clearwater keyed in some code that illuminated the inner lights of the vehicle. The next moment, she was up and at Clarke’s side, hoisting the girl up on unsteady footing as she pulled them out of the still-opening doors and into the enclosed hallway leading from the dock.

Beyond the short hallway, a series of guards and automatons awaited them, moving to form something of a protective circle around Clarke and Clearwater as they moved in a huddled formation into the glass building. Clarke looked every which way as she stumbled along, doing her best to see what was around her and failing miserably as the police force obscured everything but the ceiling above her from view. She glanced at Agent Clearwater whose jaw was clenched tight as she kept a hold of Clarke, clearly perturbed about this whole ordeal.

Moments later, the guards ushered the two women into a windowless elevator, causing Clarke to sway a little on her feet as she remained utterly and completely disoriented. She was operating on pure instinct at this point, allowing her feet to take her where she was guided as she worked to keep her mind as carefully blank as she could manage. The abrupt changes of scenery weren’t helping anything, though…

To Clarke’s mild surprise, the horde of guards held back as the women settled into the elevator, fixing Clarke with mildly hostile stares as the doors slid shut. As soon as they closed, Agent Clearwater exhaled sharply, drawing Clarke’s gaze to her as she shook her head. The moment Clearwater noticed Clarke staring, though, she immediately attempted to school her expression back to that lofty mask of authority.

*I’m clearly missing a hell of a lot of context here…*

Unsurprisingly, this elevator traveled even faster than the one in the silo, carrying them down some unknown number of floors within seconds before the doors slid open once more.

As they opened, Clarke drew in a shaky breath, taking in the sight of a pristine lobby devoid of anyone but guards and automatons. Clarke could now see that all of the floors acted as bordering around the interior of the circular building, open indoor balconies winding all the way around to the top floor tens of levels up. The lobby was situated on the ground floor in the middle of it all, acting as the central focal point. The entire building appeared to be lit solely by natural afternoon light at the moment, every wall and walkway made of that same translucent glass that covered every other structure Clarke had seen thus far -- save for the tiles beneath her feet and the concrete of the silo, of course.

As Agent Clearwater pulled her through the lobby, Clarke took note of the almost sterile-looking furniture that was situated throughout the open space, giving the entire lobby the appearance of a
white-washed showroom that hadn’t been touched for decades -- though equipped with hi-tech amenities as it appeared to be. The doors to the outside were mere feet away now; Clarke gulped back the surge of fear that gripped her as one of the uniformed automatons pulled a door open for them, standing silent and ready as it watched Clarke exit the building.

Once again, Clarke found herself shielding her gaze from the blinding afternoon sunlight, squinting between rapid blinks as Clearwater took her over to the edge of the white marble platform that comprised the walkway in front of the building. Clarke gulped rather audibly at what was beyond it, taking an unconscious step back as she absorbed the sights and sounds of the scene before her.

The marble staircase they currently stood at the top of was one of many that led down into what Clarke believed to be the city’s center -- the heart from which the rest of this place received its pulse. Unlike the sterile glass building from which she’d just come, the scene before her was overflowing with life and color, bustling with people whose voices and laughter culminated to create a single cacophony of sound that hung over Clarke’s head like an ominous, taunting cloud.

Some of those same live billboards she’d seen from afar flashed in vivid color up close now, positioned on the walls of nearly every building surrounding the center. They displayed advertisements and moving pictures that Clarke could scarcely comprehend, showing people using products she’d never seen or heard of before while acting far too happy about it. Neon signs and futuristic displays seduced passersby into shops stacked one-after-the-other, over-crowded with patrons who weaved in and out of the buildings with seemingly practiced ease. Every single person she could see was dressed head-to-toe in high-quality materials of varying degrees of color, their hairstyles sleek and their features sharp -- as attractive as Agent Clearwater, if not more so given their ability to use fashion as a representation of themselves.

Is it a requirement that everyone has to look like a bunch of 30th-century Greek gods here, or…?

The stark contrast between the cell she’d occupied less than an hour ago and this blossoming metropolis was dizzying, leaving Clarke entirely over-stimulated as she attempted to take everything in. She did her best to ground the sights, smells, and sounds in things that she knew, rationalizing that this central location might well be what Polis would look like in another hundred years or so -- if they managed to get a hold of whatever tech and energy source was powering this place, that is. Everything was splashed with vivid colors, flashing lights and whirring sounds of sleek tech abundant, and Clarke began to wonder if the ringing in her ears and the trembling in her legs would ever cease while she was in this place -- this technologically-superior glass city filled with gorgeous people and brilliant color.

“I find this section of the city a bit overwhelming, too,” Agent Clearwater said softly after a moment, drawing Clarke’s gaze to her as she looked out over the city center. She looked at Clarke after a beat, quirking a brow as she shrugged rather casually. “Maybe it’s a personal preference thing… No matter.”
Clarke swallowed the lump in her throat that’d lodged itself there all of a sudden, struggling to quiet the maelstrom of thoughts in her brain. One particular face appeared every other minute now -- almost like a strobe light pulsing with flashes of Clarke’s anxiety.

*Lexa, Lexa, Lexa -- where is Lexa? How will I ever find her here --?*

“Welcome to the New Republic, Clarke Griffin.”

The phrase brought Clarke up short, sending frigid ice down her spine and throughout her extremities. It pulled on an old memory like a noose to the neck, restricting Clarke’s airflow as long-forgotten images flashed through her brain --

"*I would address you by your name,*" the old man began, voice still as pleasant as before. "*But, I'm afraid I don't know what it is... I am Dante Wallace, President of Mt. Weather under the guidance of the New Republic. And you are?*"

What did she know about the Mountain?

*For starters, she knew that they were using Grounder blood -- the cause for which she could now discern had something to do with the way their bodies were able to metabolize radiation in comparison to those who lived within the Mountain. She knew they were under the guidance of some so-called "New Republic," and that their technology seemed to be on-par with that of the 22nd Century technology the Ark relied on --*

“I’ve been ordered to give you a tour of the place -- away from the crowds, obviously,” Agent Clearwater continued, shattering Clarke’s revery as she fixed the girl with a somewhat disgruntled expression. “Can’t imagine how this could ever go wrong, what with the metal cuffs and the prison uniform rendering you such a subtle presence...” She gestured dismissively to Clarke’s grey scrubs and restraints, clearly unaware of the fact that Clarke’s world was crumbling around her.

Clarke allowed words to form before she could even process what they were, reaching weakly towards Clearwater in the hopes of finding a grounding presence.

“You were...you worked with Mt. Weather.” The words came out garbled, cracking in the dryness of Clarke’s throat as she shook her head, nearly in a trancelike state at this point.

Agent Clearwater went completely rigid, fixing Clarke with a carefully blank look as she raised her chin in a gesture of defiance.

"They were our subsidiary at one point, yes -- though many of us are grateful that you took care of them so that we didn’t have to.”
The comment took Clarke aback, sending her reeling yet again as Clearwater took her by the arm and guided her away from the steps at a parallel angle to the city center. Away from the crowds, she’d said…

“Only those of us in the force were permitted to know of Mt. Weather’s existence, but we were thankful for your assistance nonetheless… Those idiots never should have survived in the first place.”

Before Clarke could gather the strength to speak through her vertigo, the agent was turning them away from the city center, taking Clarke down a flight of steps and onto a lower-level walkway beside the glass building they’d emerged from. Even the stretches of pavement Clarke supposed could be considered alleyways were spotless, just like everything else in this city -- the New Republic.

What did it all mean? How did this place even exist? How was it possible that it could have existed for nearly a century without being detected by anyone other than its subsidiary bunker of civilization -- the one that’d been terrorizing the Commander’s domain from the outset of its formation?

The sheer number of questions swirling in Clarke’s brain was enough to give her a dizzying migraine. She was almost relieved when Agent Clearwater spoke up to fill the silence as they walked.

“We are a zero-waste society,” Clearwater began, slowing their pace to an amble as they walked down the middle of an empty side-street between another pair of glass towers and smaller buildings. “Everything we produce and consume is completely biodegradable and non-toxic, and our energy is sourced entirely from the sun and wind.”

A pair of guards appeared out of nowhere -- one human and one automaton. Clarke was still doing her best not to pass out.

“Every citizen of the Republic consumes a solely plant-based diet, and we are proud to boast an average life expectancy of 107-years-old with only slight variations amongst biological sexes.” Clarke met Agent Clearwater’s gaze on her with bewilderment, feeling as though she was listening to some tourist-geared recording play out in live format.

“Diseases that were once thought to be incurable and hardly treatable in the 21st century -- cancer, Alzheimer’s, MS, and the like -- are now completely curable, and present very little long-term risk to our citizens. Our most common cause of death is old age, and even that is typically as peaceful as falling asleep.”

They were nearly to the end of the long block book-ended with skyscrapers, and something stuck out in Clarke’s mind -- a minor detail, but one rather perplexing as she attempted to process what she was hearing.

If the most common cause of death was old age, and the average Republic citizen made it to 107, how was that even possible? Unless everything Clarke knew about human history was incorrect -- which was seeming more plausible by the minute -- then she was sure that Apocalypse One (or
Preimfaya, as Lexa called it) had happened roughly 98 years or so ago. Which meant that 107 shouldn’t have been the life expectancy; it could’ve been the lifespan of a couple outliers who’d survived the nuclear bombs and lived to develop this society just as the Grounders had formulated theirs, sure, but it shouldn’t have been the *average*.

“Our birth rate is currently situated at exact replacement -- two children per couple, the ideal average for a flourishing society --,”

“Why are you telling me all of this?” Clarke interrupted the agent, cutting her across with a cold glare as Clearwater met her gaze -- clearly displeased with having been cut off. “It’s not like I’m planning a fucking summer vacation here; I’m your *prisoner*. I don’t give a damn about your encyclopedia stats -- I want to know where my friends are, and what the *hell* is going on here.”

The agent stopped in her tracks, forcing Clarke to follow suit as the other two guards came to Clearwater’s flank. Clarke did her best to direct every ounce of fury within her fragile frame towards the agent and her cohorts, hands balling into fists in front of her as she flexed against her metallic restraints.

“If you’re so confident that my people and I are inferior to yours -- which I’m sure is what you’ve been implying this entire time -- then why don’t you take off these restraints, put down your guns, and show me what you’ve got?”

Clarke knew it was stupid -- slightly less than a snowball’s chance in hell in terms of probability -- but she was growing desperate. She needed to gain some sort of leverage here and, even if that leverage was temporary, it might be worth it just to piss these elitist assholes off.

“I win, you take me to my friends; I lose -- well, I guess that’s up to you... Still, it beats pretending like you’re my tour guide, doesn’t it?”

Though Clarke could’ve been imagining it, she would’ve sworn Agent Clearwater smirked at that last bit. The next moment, though, the woman’s face smoothed into indiscernibility once more, shifting her feet as she adjusted the gun in her hands.

“Cute, but my instructions are clear -- and we’re almost there now.”

Clarke wanted to spit in the woman’s face -- would have, if not for the dryness of her mouth.

Clearwater had her by the arm and pulled her forward in the next breath, warranting another eye roll from Clarke as she dragged her feet far more intentionally now.

*If all else fails, I suppose pettiness is always a solid last resort*...

Less than a minute later, the small group came upon the start of a moderate incline, this one accompanied by appropriately-positioned buildings and structures slanting in kind along the slope. As they started upward, Clarke wondered rather absent-mindedly how an architectural build would
go on one of these streets. Surely, building on these kinds of angles couldn’t be easy --

“CLARKE!!”

The voice was like a punch to the chest, forcing all the air from Clarke’s lungs as she searched for the source --

Standing at the top of the hill surrounded by six uniformed guards was none other than Lexa, wearing the same grey scrubs and white shoes as Clarke with metal cuffs around her wrists and neck. Lexa’s long hair framed her bare face and flowed over her shoulders completely free of braids, clean and shiny in all of its natural waves -- as though it’d been washed quite recently.

Save for those sacred and striking features that would call to Clarke for as long as she lived, Lexa looked like a completely different person standing before her now.

“Clarke!!” Lexa called again, watering eyes wide and filled with dread as her face flashed a warring array of emotions -- all of them bled thru with distress. “Ai Klark --,”

Before Clarke could even process what she was doing, she felt her elbow wrench up and into Agent Clearwater’s nose, effectively breaking the woman’s hold on her with a satisfying crunch as her feet carried her forward into a sprint. She was already halfway to Lexa --

A surge of white-hot electricity seemed to hit her from all sides as she collapsed almost immediately, too stunned to cry out in pain as her staggering heart rate pulsed loudly in her ears. She heard Lexa scream in an uncharacteristic display of emotion as she went down, rolling onto her back with a groan as the automaton appeared above her, its gun trained on her forehead.

“Try that again,” the male guard that’d been next to Clearwater said, coming to a stop beside the automaton with a snarl curling his lips, “and I’ll put a bullet in your back.”

He hoisted Clarke to her feet with unnecessary roughness, rattling her intentionally as she attempted to catch her breath. She couldn’t quite stand upright as the man continued to drag her up the hill, black spots dotting her vision as her hearing came and went.

Note to self: electric shock is not a preferred method of punishment. Don’t do that shit again...

The next thing Clarke knew, she was practically thrown to her knees as they reached the top of the hill, grunting in pain as she slumped into herself on the pavement.

“Clarke, beja -- look at me.” The voice drew Clarke’s eyes up immediately, sending a much more welcome surge throughout every inch of her as a pair of hands wrapped themselves around her own where they’d fallen to her lap.
Clarke looked up, sucking in a sharp breath at the realization that Lexa was right there, on her knees just as Clarke was with little more than inches between them now.

It was too much to bear -- the sight of Lexa looking not at all like Lexa, the two of them trapped in some unknown metropolis amongst technology and weapons far more advanced than anything either of them had ever seen. Immersed in an onslaught of overstimulation amidst a slew of questions that neither of them had the wherewithal to answer...

A sob ripped from Clarke’s chest, almost echoing in the space around her as she collapsed forward into Lexa. The feeling was like a shot of morphine directly into her bloodstream, overtaking any and every sensation that’d sought to take precedence before. She felt Lexa nuzzle into her hair almost desperately, her movements frantic and urgent as she attempted to close every ounce of distance between them. The movement was awkward and difficult without the use of either of their hands, but neither seemed to care --

It was exactly what they needed in that moment. Everything and everyone else could have faded away in that moment, and neither of them would’ve known...

She felt Lexa’s body shake against hers, the telltale sound of the girl’s cries poking irreparable holes in Clarke’s chest as she pressed her face more firmly into Lexa’s neck, getting as close as she could. Clarke knew her own tears were probably soaking the collar of Lexa’s scrubs, but none of that mattered so long as she could feel the pulse beneath the girl’s warm skin.

Lexa’s hands shook where they held Clarke’s, the two of them readjusting their grip every few seconds as they attempted to ground themselves in each other. Clarke lifted her head from Lexa’s neck, earning a whimper of displeasure from Lexa. She ghosted her lips across Lexa’s cheek as she moved to press their foreheads together, uncaring of their hostile onlookers.

They know everything else about us already...

“How are you, Lex? Are you okay --?”

“I’m fine, love. I’m fine,” Lexa interrupted her, nodding shakily against Clarke’s forehead as they pressed closer together. Even from this angle, Clarke could see the dark circles rimming Lexa’s eyes, her skin a ghostly pallor against her otherwise pristine appearance.

“I had to see you -- I had to make sure you were okay --,”

“I’m okay, Lex, really, just --,” Clarke shook her head against Lexa’s as she squeezed her eyes shut, breathing harshly where her lips nearly brushed Lexa’s. “Overwhelmed and confused… where are we? Do you know where the others are, or what’s happened to them?”
“No,” Lexa shook her head once, inhaling a trembling breath as her hands gripped Clarke’s harder. “I am afraid I’m just as lost as you are… Did you wake up in one of the silos, too? I was so scared I wouldn’t be able to find you --,”

“Alright, that’s enough,” the guard directly behind Lexa growled, wrenching her away from Clarke - - though she managed to keep hold of Clarke’s hands. Lexa glared up at him with a sudden burst of fury cutting through her misery, fixing him with a stare so enraged that the man actually took a step back and dropped his hold on her.

“You promised your compliance as long as we brought you to see this one first,” another guard spoke up, stepping out from the crowd behind Lexa as he addressed her in a measured tone. “We’ve done our part -- now time for yours.”

Before Clarke could even take a breath, she felt herself being dragged back so roughly that the force of it broke Lexa’s hold on her, an arm coming around to grip her in a chokehold as Lexa yelled for her. The horde of guards swarmed from behind Lexa, obscuring her from Clarke’s view as she fought against the arm that held her around the neck -- an “arm” that belonged to the metallic automaton that was about as immovable as a steel bar.

*Guess this is what it’s like when these things actually fight back…*

Clarke struggled and squirmed, crying out as she watched the group of guards retreat from view, fully encompassing Lexa in their wake as the girl yelled for Clarke. The two of them sounded tragically distraught, their cries reverberating in the otherwise quiet space as everything seemed to bounce off of the glass walls of the buildings.

The automaton forced Clarke backwards, pulling her by the neck back down the hill and off to the left as Clarke writhed and shouted. The change of scenery from outside street to inside lobby barely phased her as she felt herself being dragged into one of the nearby buildings, her cries resounding even more loudly now as they found more surfaces off of which to rebound.

“Alright, alright -- *enough!*” Agent Clearwater yelled, suddenly coming into view with a grimace twisting her features. The dried blood spattered on her lips and cheeks gave Clarke a sick sort of pleasure as the agent addressed her cohorts.

“I’ve got it from here. She’s not going anywhere with those restraints on her -- trust me.”

The automaton dropped its hold of Clarke immediately, allowing her to crumple to the ground as it stepped back. She looked up, gasping for breath as Clearwater talked quietly with the male guard who appeared exceptionally annoyed that he was being ordered away. The robot stood quiet and ominous behind Clarke, apparently awaiting its next order as the humans conversed.
After a tense moment, the male guard grunted in displeasure, motioning for the automaton to follow him as the two of them made for the doors of the building. Clearwater was crouching in front of Clarke in the next blink, smirking humorlessly as she moved to pull Clarke to her feet.

“Remind me to return the favor for this some day,” she gestured to her nose in Clarke’s periphery as she hurried them to a set of glass elevator doors. In the back of her mind, Clarke registered mild surprise at the fact that this building appeared to have the exact same decor and layout as the one they’d first come out of.

“Electrocuting me wasn’t enough?” Clarke rasped as they entered the glass elevator, not bothering to meet the agent’s glare on her as she struggled to catch her breath.

“It’s not the same as a broken bone, no.”

*Good -- now she has something to remember me by…*

Clarke must’ve blacked out for a minute after that, because the next thing she knew, she was being dragged from the elevator and into a long hallway. The fleeting afternoon sun lit the way as Clearwater pulled them towards the very last door on the right, throwing it open and all but tossing Clarke to the tiled floor inside.

She watched from the ground as Agent Clearwater made for the far wall, which was essentially a giant window from floor to ceiling. The room was empty save for a long black desk and a single office chair behind it, situated a few feet from the window through which Clearwater currently looked.

*Everything in this city is so fucking sterile-looking…*

A crease formed between Clarke’s brows as she watched the agent bring her hand up to chew on her fingernails, restlessly shifting from foot to foot as she appeared to stare off into space. Clarke looked around her, searching for anything that could be used as a weapon and, once again, coming up nill.

“Are all of these skyscrapers sitting here empty like this?” Clarke asked after awhile, needing some kind of distraction from the tense quiet of this strange place.

Clearwater barely acknowledged the question, eyes trained on something near the horizon as she spoke.
“Not all of them, but many, yes… A century wasn’t enough to re-populate the corporate workforce apparently.”

There was something in her tone -- something bitter, almost angry -- that gave Clarke pause. Nearly everything about this woman was difficult to read, and Clarke couldn’t seem to predict which questions would draw forth answers like this and which ones would leave her in silence.

Clearwater turned to face her suddenly, crossing the room in a few strides before crouching in front of Clarke, eyes wide and wild.

“That kind of love is forbidden here, you know,” she whispered, almost conspiratorial all of a sudden as Clarke furrowed her brows even further, obviously confused.

“What?”

Clearwater exhaled a shaky breath, her features contorting almost painfully as she glanced every which way around the room -- an utterly bizarre action considering they were most-assuredly alone.

“Love between…,” she swallowed, struggling immensely with the words as Clarke leaned in to catch them, “…the same sex. It’s...prohibited. Punishable by decades of imprisonment upon mere suspicion -- warranting death in cases of actual conviction.”

Clarke simply stared at the woman, drawing a total blank as to how she was supposed to react. Clearwater shook her head and let it hang by her shoulders rather defeatedly. The movement made her look smaller, more youthful somehow -- like a heartbroken child.

“It’s considered to be a... barrier to reproductive purposes -- superfluous at best.”

Again, Clarke wasn’t sure how she was supposed to respond. She’d never heard of anything like this before. It’d certainly never been an issue on the Ark; in fact, romantic love between the same sex was often considered almost preferable in an environment in which excess reproduction was an existential threat to them all. Besides, many people she’d grown up with hadn’t seemed to have a preference as to who they’d fall in love with -- much less sleep with -- though most had aligned themselves with a label from Before at different points.

It’d never been something that Clarke had thought to be of much consequence, if she was being honest.
“Is it some sort of religious thing?” Clarke found herself asking, doing her best to call back to the societies of Before and how they’d constructed their social and governance structures. If she’d had to guess, she would definitely ascertain that this place’s laws mirrored more of those rules than they did the Grounders’.

“No,” Agent Clearwater shook her head immediately, meeting Clarke’s gaze again with those same wild eyes -- eyes that shone through with something fierce now. “Religion is banned here as well. Too much risk of social unrest and warfare.”

Clarke simply nodded at that, considering.

If she really thought about it, she supposed that most of the wars before Preimfaya had been linked to some sort of ideology or religion -- if not directly caused by it. Disputes over claims to holy lands, battles for the authority to set the social precedents and decide upon norms in various geographical locations, outright mass murder and forced colonization for some decided cause -- all in the name of one god or another. Only for a new group of humans to come along and declare it all null and void...

*It all seems rather pointless now, doesn’t it?*

“And what about those of you who...?” Clarke trailed off softly, allowing Agent Clearwater to fill in the blanks as the woman nodded. She looked away from Clarke, working her jaw as she appeared to struggle to find words.

When she looked back at Clarke, the expression on her face nearly brought Clarke to tears. The woman before her was no longer a soldier -- a trained mercenary sent to make Clarke’s life miserable -- she was just a woman; a woman in clear and obvious agony, the raw intensity of it etched into every line and plane of her features.

“We do what we must to survive.”

*We...*

Before Clarke could even attempt to think of a response, Agent Clearwater was up, turning away from Clarke and striding back towards the window. She settled into the same place as before -- almost as though she was attempting to erase the past few minutes through sheer repetition alone.

Clarke didn’t know what to say, didn’t know what to think. Her thoughts were barely coherent at this point -- a jumbled stream of questions and random facts about this strange new place that were making her doubt everything she’d ever known. In fact, she imagined that if she kept along this
current trajectory, she might just end up questioning the very notion of reality, *itself*...

Steeling herself against that almost instinctual urge to spiral, Clarke moved until her back was pressed against the nearest wall, allowing her head to droop back as her eyelids grew heavier by the second. Though the light of the impossibly sunny day shone in every inch of this room, Clarke found it almost natural to close her eyes, relish in the warmth against her bare skin as she forced that state of nothingness to take hold.

As her thoughts slowed and her mind fogged, Clarke kept one face at the center of it all, knowing with every fiber of her being that the all-encompassing love she felt for that face and the person behind it was the only truth she had at this point -- the only truth she might ever have again...

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“What’s the meaning of this? What the hell is going on --?”

“Our orders are from the top; she’s to be brought here too so that he may meet them both in person. He says it is the only way they will both comply.”

Clarke’s eyelids fluttered open to the sound of tense voices and multiple pairs of boots echoing against the tile. With a start, Clarke realized it was nearly dark outside now, the light in the room coming from the fluorescent lights overhead and the ambient glow of the city below them. Looking away from the window, Clarke’s brow quirked at the sight of Agent Clearwater in close consult with the male guard who she’d sent away before, the woman looking exceptionally heated as she crowded his personal space. Clarke’s attention was almost immediately directed elsewhere, though, as the sight of multiple familiar looking guards amongst a horde of uniforms pouring into the room captured her gaze...

The next moment, Clarke thought her heart might actually burst out of her chest at the sight of a comparatively smaller figure coming through the doors with two guards on her flank, her hair even more untamed and face more sickly than before.

“Lexa!!”

At the sound of her name, Lexa stopped in her tracks, eyes darting every which way before locking onto Clarke and widening with shock. To Clarke’s astonishment, the guards allowed Lexa to break free of their ranks, watching as she ran over to Clarke and all but fell to her knees in front of the girl
who waited with outstretched arms. Lexa immediately ducked her head into the space between Clarke’s cuffed limbs, burying her face in Clarke’s neck as she gasped for breath between quiet whimpers. Her full weight slumped against Clarke who managed to work some of her fingers into Lexa’s hair despite the awkwardness of their positioning.

“It’s okay, Lex, I’ve got you -- I’m here,” Clarke cooed softly, ignoring the frigid stares and curled lips directed at them as she attempted to comfort her distraught love.

Clarke couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen Lexa so scattered and afraid. Even during their first encounter in Polis upon Clarke’s return from the dead, so to speak, Lexa had managed to find a grounding place in all of the chaos -- a foundation of numbness upon which she could stand, as temporary as it was. Here and now, though, Clarke got the sense that she was witnessing a Lexa whose entire reality was being torn to shreds far more effectively than before, whose life and history was now being called into question by a civilization of people more knowing and advanced than anything or anyone in her wildest dreams. Not even the Mountain Men at full technological capacity had posed as much of a threat as the Republic’s very existence did now.

All Clarke could do was hold Lexa closer, wait for death or absolution as guards continued to filter in.

*Why are there so many of them?*

Clarke felt something strange against her arm, drawing her attention down as she registered the gauze and bandage taped to Lexa’s right arm. Lexa was pressed as close to Clarke as was physically possible, and Clarke had to nudge into the girl’s hair a bit to draw her eyes up.

“What did they do to you, Lex? Are you okay?” Lexa nodded at Clarke’s quiet question, the movement brushing the top of her head against Clarke’s chin.

“They took my blood,” Lexa whispered back, just loudly enough for Clarke to hear over the din of the last of the soldiers filing in. “So much blood, I --.”

“Atten-*tion!!*” one of the guards yelled, cutting Lexa off as all of the soldiers silenced immediately. “Form rank!”

With that command, every uniformed body in the room shifted into motion, forming six rows of three soldiers on either side of the door, leaving a single column of space for entry and exit. Lexa turned in Clarke’s arms to watch the display, positioning her body as protectively as she could manage in front of Clarke’s.

As soon as the last man shuffled into position, the two big columns of soldiers turned to face one
another, posture rigid and weapons at the ready.

“Present arms!”

In a single collective movement, all guns were drawn and positioned in the air to form something of a multi-layered triangle above the entryway.

Though her view was immensely obscured, Clarke caught sight of a lone figure approaching the doorway from the other side of the wall, stopping at the threshold as that same soldier spoke again:

"We honor the presence of Joseph Bane, Commander-in-Chief of the New Republic and Leader of the First Men!"

“May his life be ever-lasting,” came the collective response of the soldiers.

Clarke thought she saw Agent Clearwater near the back section of the far column of soldiers, but she couldn’t be sure as this Joseph Bane began his procession beneath the pseudo-arch of machine guns. As he emerged from the crowd and into the open space of the office room, Clarke couldn’t help the chill that traveled down her spine, the blood-freezing cold that washed over her entire body at the sight of the man.

Joseph Bane was slight, probably only a couple of inches taller than Clarke and Lexa, but the aura he gave off was unlike anything Clarke had ever felt before -- as though this man was the real and true king of this universe and every other one like it. He wore the same uniform as his soldiers beneath a black long-coat, his shoulders adorned with military patches of some sort that reflected red and gold in the fluorescent light. His dark hair was being overtaken by silver above a beard and mustache of the same colors, the few lines of his face standing in stark contrast to the clear and youthful perfection of his skin and pallor.

It was his eyes that really shook Clarke to her core, though, their piercing, icy blue almost inhuman as they sparkled with mirth above his sharp nose. Joseph tilted his head a little as Clarke stared at him, meeting her gaze with a disturbing smile spreading across his thin lips.

“And there they are -- even more beautiful in person, I must say.”

It’s him.

The voice that had spoken to her in the silo and through the speakers of the underground command
center -- *this was him*. The sound of it reverberated throughout the room just as it had over both sets of loud-speakers, giving the effect of thunder as it seemed to shake the very ground beneath them.

Lexa leaned further into Clarke, clearly coming to the same realization as the man stepped closer to them, his movements lithe and intentional -- like that of a predator stalking its prey.

“You both look positively *petrified,*” Joseph exclaimed, clapping his hands together as he laughed joyfully. The sound was like nails on a chalkboard to Clarke’s ears, raising bumps over every inch of her skin as the man continued to laugh.

He silenced abruptly, quirking his head to the side as that chilling smile stretched across his features once more.

“But you are my guests, and I cannot have my guests afraid of me -- no, that simply will *not* do.” Joseph paced before them for a few moments, the silence of the room almost physically palpable as his soldiers remained perfectly still and at the ready, their guns now lowered.

“Where to start, then? Where to start?” It sounded as though he was talking more to himself than to anyone else.

“A-ha!!” he exclaimed happily just a moment later, causing both Clarke and Lexa to flinch as he clapped his hands together once more, eyes locking onto Lexa. “Renolds, your knife, please.”

A lone soldier scampered out of the ranks immediately, moving to Joseph’s side and presenting him with a black-hilted dagger in a hand that forced itself not to shake. Keeping his eyes glued to Lexa, Joseph took the knife and motioned the boy away, paying him no mind as he all-but-sprinted back to his place.

Joseph closed the distance between himself and his prisoners in the next moment, forcing them as tightly against the wall as was physically possible as he dropped into a crouch mere feet from them. He grinned like a cheshire cat beneath those piercing eyes, directing their attention down towards his open palm as he dragged the dagger blade across his bare skin.

Clarke felt Lexa go rigid against her as Joseph’s hand began to bleed, eliciting a gasp from Clarke the moment she saw it too.

Out from the cut in Joseph’s palm and down onto the marble tiles beneath them flowed blood as dark as night, oily and black in its sacred complexion.

*He’s a...Nightblood?*
“So, see -- no need to be afraid,” Joseph purred after a pause, smile growing impossibly wider as Clarke felt Lexa taking shallow, hiccuping breaths. His eyes continued to bore into Lexa like a frigid beam. “I’m just like you.”

Joseph straightened into a standing position in the next movement, towering over them with that sinister smile contorting his features in a way that Clarke was sure would haunt her nightmares for years to come -- if she survived this, that is…

“And now that we have that out of the way -- shall we begin?”

Chapter End Notes

did i miss anything in the fandom since the last update ???? lmao

i can't believe eliza and bob got MARRIED!!! who'da thunk it... i don't know them or their business so i'm not gonna make assumptions based on any of the rumors going around -- all i can say is good for them!! they've been best friends for like 15 yrs so that's super cute. it's hilarious watching blorkes blur the line between reality and fiction though -- as if jason would EVER do anything other than what was most "shocking" on the show in the long term. i'm relatively neutral when it comes to whether or not clarke and bellamy will end up together in the show tbh; it's all just super amusing to me at this point lmao.

ANYWAYS, back to your regularly-scheduled programming !!! hope you enjoyed the chapter!! this was another one i'd been planning for awhile, so it became relatively easy to write. i really wanted to focusing on revealing the new republic and following up on the lore i'd introduced in part one of this story, so hopefully you enjoyed the way a couple of those questions got answered. there are still soooo many things left unrevealed, and i'm even more excited to follow through on all of that stuff...

on the real, try not to let any of the blorkes or antis get you down. clexa is ours, fanfic is ours, and nothing they say nor do will ever be able to lessen the impact this ship and fandom has had on the LGBT community and our media representation. react how you will to canon beliza (lol), but also remember that they're real people, and their business is theirs. also, it's just another cw wedding lmao. (i mean seriously, these people don't even need tinder i guess.)

take it easy, and have a happy pride month loves (:}
End Notes

Did somebody call for a reunion? (;

Feels to come...

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!