Miles to Go Before I Sleep

by endgirl

Summary

Adrift in Polis and facing another end of the world, Clarke finds traces of Lexa everywhere she turns. What if one remnant means something more?

A post-season three fix.

Notes

This is my first Clexa fic and my first Omegaverse story. I'm just really excited to be here, guys.

This story is canon-compliant through season three, assuming the show existed in the Omegaverse. Everything we saw in season three happened here--or seemed to. If canon compliance worries you, remember it's also tagged fix-it. The dubcon tag is present due to the consent issues inherent in alpha/omega dynamics, but you won't find any overt coercion or force here. I'm expecting the story to clock in around 70k-100k+ words when all is said and done.
If you give it a read, I'd love to hear your thoughts!
Clarke surveyed Polis with a weary stare. It had been three days since A.L.I.E.’s demise, but she had slept only a handful of hours in that time. There were precious few places where she felt safe enough to close her eyes, and too many worries rattling in her mind when she finally found one.

The city down below bustled with nervous energy, grey in the afternoon fog. The crucifixes had been torn down plank by plank the day before, but bloody, muddy water still puddled in the streets. Houses still stood empty, and Clarke wondered which would welcome their owners home one day. Who was still slowly making their way back to the life they knew before A.L.I.E.’s salvation, and who had been lost?

“Fleimkepa.” There was the creaking of a door, and the shuffling of feet—two sets, Clarke thought. She turned from the tall tower window to find two guards in the doorway. The ghost of a smile passed Clarke’s lips. Lexa would have been proud. She was finally learning to see the world with more than just her eyes.

It was Han, a weathered beta with dark face tattoos, and Ryder, the burly, bearded alpha who’d once escorted her to TonDC. Both had been chipped, but both escaped the final battle with no more than scrapes and sprains. Under Indra’s command, they had been helping to restore the tower—first to carry out the wounded and the dead, and now to remove the other traces of violence from what had once been a place of peace.

Downstairs other guards were clearing the rubble from the explosion, and still others were helping those too injured to leave. The elevator had been repaired first, then the ladder, and now the stairs were slowly being rebuilt, step by step.

Projects. That was what Grounders turned to to keep themselves busy in the face of an uncertain future. Clarke couldn’t blame them. She herself had been making constant rounds between the upper floors, the makeshift infirmary, and the healer’s hut a few blocks away.

Somehow she kept finding herself back here, in the commander’s bedroom.

“What about that?” Han said, fiddling with the hilt of her short sword. She nodded toward the majestic woodwork and sumptuous furs that sat to one side of the room.

Lexa’s bed.

Clarke swallowed.

Lexa’s bed, still seeped in black blood. Lexa’s furs, which reeked of Ontari’s acrid alpha anger and an omega Clarke couldn’t quite place. Lexa’s sanctuary, looped with an iron chain and collar. Lexa’s home, covered in bullet holes.

_Burn it_, Clarke thought. And then, desperately: _Let me keep it._

“Let’s get rid of the coverings, but leave the rest,” Clarke said, hoarse. “The new commander will need somewhere to sleep.”
Han and Ryder shared an uneasy glance. It was the same worried look Clarke had seen exchanged between almost every Grounder she’d passed, both within the tower and without. For there was no new commander. Not yet.

Titus’s scouts had yet to return with a single Nightblood. And even when they eventually did, it would be years before the feet of the toddling new novitiates touched the floor while sitting upon the commander’s throne. Years before they could fight one another to the death for the right to be called Heda.

Clarke tried not picture Lexa that way. Tried not to envision a lanky sixteen-year-old with wild braids and a wide-open soul perched against a tangle of antlers, accepting the weight of the world on her shoulders. A girl who must have imagined her death a thousand different ways, but would never have envisioned a bullet in her bedroom on a sunny day.

“Lid em in,” Han said to Ryder.

Ryder opened the bedroom door, which he had carefully closed behind them when they entered. Even without a commander, the people of the tower still treated this as a sacred space.

In scurried a young handmaiden, who set to gathering the soiled furs. Even if Clarke hadn’t caught her sweet scent, she would have known the girl was an omega from the stiff way she bobbed her head each time Ryder gestured to another fur—like she didn’t want to show him deference, but couldn’t help herself yet. When Ryder turned his back and the girl rolled her eyes, Clarke almost smiled.

She went to the other side of the bed to help. Where the girl’s movements were hurried, Clarke’s were hesitant and slow. As she rolled up a thick white pelt that hinted of cedarwood and amber, she had to fight to keep her hands steady. Even with Ontari’s stench permeating the room, these little pockets of Lexa endured here and there. Clarke resisted the urge to scrunch the fur up under her nose and breathe deeply. Up close, the smell of blood would overwhelm anything else. She didn’t want Lexa’s memory to be tainted by blood any more than it already had been.

Clarke still remembered the first time she’d caught the commander’s scent. Not only the day, but the moment. The sunlight that had filtered through the tent at a slant. The arrogant bend of Lexa’s long legs upon her throne. The way her own forehead had felt sticky and warm. And most of all, the powerful, heady scent of alpha that had threatened to swoop her up and knock her to her knees all in the same breath.

When Clarke parted with Lexa that day, a tentative alliance in hand, she chalked up her reaction to being newly off her suppressants. On the Ark, the monthly injections that kept her heat in check and kept her omega scent from driving the alphas to unfortunate outcomes, as the Council put it, also prevented her nose from working properly. The suppressants made the alphas smell hardly more potent than betas, and what little scent Clarke had made out was harsh and abrasive, like the caustic chemicals used in the Maintenance Bay. So when she met Lexa, she’d figured, she was finally discovering what alphas were really supposed to smell like. Powerful but smooth. Intoxicating but restrained.

Now, of course, Clarke knew better. Most alphas still made her nose sting, just like on the Ark, only now there were no drugs in her system to mute them. Her reaction to the commander’s scent had been her nose trying to tell her what her heart would still need months to learn. That Lexa’s was hers, and she was Lexa’s—even if she didn’t bear the alpha’s mating mark, and now never would.

“Wait,” Clarke said suddenly. So suddenly that the handmaiden flinched back from the bed, then frowned at herself.
Something metallic glinted in the bottommost fur. Clarke reached for it, expecting a knife or some Ice Nation trinket.

The girl leaned over the bed to peer down curiously. “Chit daun bilaik?”

Clarke held up her find between trembling fingers. It was the bronze gear Lexa wore between her eyes. The one that had tumbled off that last day, forgotten, as they’d knocked foreheads in their eagerness. Clarke swallowed down the memory of how Lexa had laughed, pink-cheeked and breathless.

“Heda,” breathed the handmaiden, full of wonder.

“Em pleni,” Han said gruffly. “Hos op.”

The girl gathered up the furs and darted out, shooting one last look over her shoulder.

Ryder and Han watched Clarke apprehensively, as if she might turn around and walk right through the window and off the tower. Was her anguish really so plain?

“Twelve teeth,” she said absently, rubbing her thumb over the polished surface.


Clarke smiled weakly at their effort, and their loyalty—to Lexa, to the Coalition, and now to her. She missed the days when all she had to worry about was Skaikru’s place in the Coalition. Now she worried whether there could be a Coalition without a commander. And whether they would even need one in six months’ time, or if they would all be vaporized by then—Skaikru, Trikru, everyone.

“I’ll keep it to give to the next commander,” Clarke husked out.

She wondered if the guards recognized the lie as easily as her pain, and if they knew the real reason for either. When the scouts found a new commander—if they found one—Clarke would give over the Flame. But this was different. This was Lexa’s.

Her hand dropped to her side, the gear clenched in her fist.

This was what she had left.

Outside, the nervous energy Clarke had observed from the tower felt like fear. The air smelled like pain. Most people seemed to still be reeling from their time in the City of Light and their return to the real world. Those who braved the streets hurried about with wide eyes, as if they’d never seen Polis before, and it might vanish again at any moment.

In a way, they hadn’t seen it before. Not like this.

The market stalls were empty, or splintered, or burned. Children shrank back from windows instead of romping amongst the houses. Almost no one spoke. For the second time, Clarke’s grief was joined by gratitude that Lexa would never see this. That her heart would never break for it. The first time was when Ontari had held up Aden’s head.
“This way,” Clarke said. Kane was walking beside her, and his unshaven face showed all the horror she felt inside.

She quickened their pace in the direction of the house where Ryder had told her some of the ambassadors had begun gathering to whisper and plan. Arkadia had no official ambassador anymore, and Skaikru’s place in the Coalition was hazy at best. Technically, it was Clarke’s role as the only living flamekeeper—save Murphy, who had melted into the woodwork with Emori as soon as Clarke had blinked—to tell the clan leaders how the Coalition would proceed until the next commander ascended. But in the absence of a single Nightblood, and with the distaste for Skaikru that each ambassador wore like a war medal, Clarke knew her position was a precarious one. Her opportunity to influence their decisions was limited, and her time was short.

“We need to make sure the Coalition has a leader,” Clarke said quietly. She was aware that even the lowliest tradesman they passed could be the eyes and ears of a clan leader. “Even an interim one. Someone who will keep the peace and who won’t declare war on Skaikru.”

“Polis is as weakened as Arkadia,” Kane said. He glanced furtively at two gaunt, hobbling warriors. In the City of Light, there was no pain. In the City of Light, no one had to eat. “Surely they can’t be planning an attack.” Despite his words, anxiety wafted from the usually mild-smelling beta.

“A.L.I.E. didn’t get to every village,” said Clarke. “If they call on warriors from outside the city….”

“There will be little hope of our survival,” Kane finished.

Clarke nodded. Even more pressingly, more than a dozen Sky People remained in Polis, helping the wounded or too hurt to travel themselves. They wouldn’t stand a chance against a sudden uprising. She couldn’t let more people die, and she couldn’t let Lexa’s legacy come to nothing. She squeezed the gear she still held until its teeth dug into her palm. “We need to convince the ambassadors that their clans will be safer if they keep the Coalition steady than if they turn on each other.”

Only then could Clarke consider sharing what A.L.I.E. had told her in the City of Light. Mass panic with no rule of law, with no leader to turn to for guidance, would only bring more death. She glanced at Kane, then let out a wry huff of laughter under her breath.

“What is it?” Kane asked.

Kane, who had once voted to sterilize all omegas on the basis that they weren’t really full people anyhow. Kane, who had let scores of his own citizens perish rather than tell them the truth about the dying Ark. Now here he was, walking beside an omega as an equal, and it was she who guarded the secret that could end them all.

Clarke’s mirth fell away with a sigh. “Never mind.”

She squared her shoulders when they reached the patchwork razor wire fence before the ambassadors’ makeshift headquarters. Peace was going to be a tall order considering that most Grounders didn’t understand what had really happened with the chips. They thought Skaikru had hijacked their brains, which Clarke suspected was the main reason her people were still alive. Between that and the legend of Wanheda, the Grounders were afraid to move against them—for now.

“We can use their fear of us,” Clarke said. She bit her lip, frowning. “As long as we can somehow still convince them it was us who saved them from A.L.I.E.”

Kane rubbed his beard, his crucified wrists still wrapped in gauze. “Do you think—?”
Clarke turned. A breathless Bellamy rushed up behind them.

“There goes our element of surprise.” She exchanged a wary look with Kane. Raised voices and the scrape of chairs came from inside the house, and she sighed. “I don’t think Grounder negotiations are really your thing, Bell.” At least he was no longer carrying that joken semi-automatic.

Bellamy’s eyes darkened at the criticism. Clarke suspected it was his own memories that haunted him, not her gibe. “That’s not why I’m here,” he said, jaw clenched. That was when Clarke realized that the sharp pheromones rolling off him smelled like worry, not like alpha posturing. “Your mom needs you.”

Clarke’s stomach dropped. “What happened?”

“Is Abby hurt?” Kane stepped forward, an uncharacteristic spike in his beta scent.

Bellamy seemed to realize his mistake, for he held up his hands. “Not her. Her patients.”

While most of the Sky People who could travel had fled to Arkadia as soon as the chips were deactivated, Abby had stayed behind to care for those who couldn’t. The Trikru healers in Polis had recognized her unique skills after the battle at the tower, and soon they were working in tandem to treat Trikru and Skaikru alike. It had made Clarke bristle with pain and pride to watch them. It was just the sort of cooperation she had striven for—come far, far too late.

Most of the tortured and the battle-wounded were being treated in the tower, or else had been carried home to pass in peace, as was the Trikru preference. The healer’s hut mainly held the other chipped citizens A.L.I.E. had pushed to the breaking point, whose injuries finally caught up with them when they left the City of Light.

“She says most of the people Ontari had tortured are stable,” Bellamy said. Clarke felt a tremor run through the man at her side. “But there are more and more from the City of Light coming in. The healer seconds are out making house calls”—his voice betrayed how stupid he thought that was—“and she needs another set of hands. Now.”

“I can’t now. I—”

“People are dying, Clarke.”

“No one’s found Nyko yet?”

“Would I be here if they had?”

Clarke glanced back at the house, where she could see shadows moving beyond the closest window. People were going to die if she didn’t go inside, too.

“It’s all right, Clarke,” said Kane. “I’ll speak with them, and you can return later.”

Bellamy gestured down the road. “Come on.”

It was the urging of a friend, not the command of an alpha, and that was the only reason Clarke fell in step beside him. On the Ark, it wasn’t uncommon for alphas to bark orders at omegas just for the novelty of watching them submit—and that was one of the more benevolent reasons. Clarke’s dad, also an omega, had told her that alphas had evolved this ability many millennia ago in order to save their packs from danger. Alphas were supposed to use it against enemies, and for commands like
run, or duck, or hide. They were not meant to use it for their own amusement. Then again, so much of life on the Ark was not as it was meant to be.

Clarke had only heard Lexa let the alpha into her voice a handful of times, and never while directed at her. She gave orders as the commander, but they were rarely accompanied by that reverberating force from deep inside, by the rush of pheromones that made the strongest of her subjects’ knees knock. When they were, those who were less dominant—alpha, beta, and omega alike—would fall straight to the floor. The first time Clarke heard it, when Lexa told Quint that if he attacked Clarke he attacked Heda, she had been grateful for the tree trunk at her back. She hadn’t fallen to her knees at the sound of an alpha’s voice since she had just presented, and she hadn’t planned to start then.

It was her dad who’d helped her practice resisting the demands of an alpha. Omegas had just as much a right to autonomy as anyone else, he’d told her. Her alpha mother had looked on with disapproval. Why make trouble for yourself, Clarke? she’d said. Why make them angry and put yourself in a vulnerable position? Even at fourteen, Clarke had understood what Abby meant. You can do anything you want, Clarke, as long as you only want what alphas set out for you.

The closer they got to the healer’s hut in the center of Polis, the more Clarke dreaded what she would find there. A.L.I.E. said they had six months, but that was six months before total nuclear failure. What if they were already starting to see the effects of the first meltdowns? What if the end of the world was already here?

“About what you said by the throne—” Bellamy started to say.

“Not now. We don’t have time.” She could hear the questions coming, and they were questions she wasn’t ready to answer. Bellamy knew they hadn’t saved the world yet, but that was all he could know right now. They needed more time. They needed a leader, and a plan, and time.

Clarke tried not to think of what her dad would think about her now.

She squeezed Lexa’s gear in her palm as Bellamy opened the wooden door to the hut. Inside, she let out a breath of relief. She’d never thought she would be glad to see starvation victims and broken limbs—but there were a lot of things she hadn’t expected about the ground. Starvation she could handle. Breaks she could mend.

“There you are,” Abby said, looking up to see Clarke. Her voice still rasped from the grip of the rope she had dangled from. “You take that one.” She took pressure off a gash she was bandaging long enough to point to a cot. “We need to get some fluids into him or he’s not going to last long.”

The cot held a small boy, no more than eight years old. His eyes were sunken and his cheeks hollow, like he hadn’t eaten a thing in weeks. His breath came in slow, rasping wheezes. Clarke’s gladness fell swiftly away.

She rushed to the boy’s side. She slipped the gear into her pocket, letting her fingertips ghost over the tin case that cradled what remained of the commander’s soul. When she touched the boy’s neck, she found a weak, erratic pulse. Half of the ten or so other cots held similar-looking cases. Jackson stood beside a ragged old man whose bones were clearly outlined beneath his skin. He mumbled nonsense words in Trigedasleng as Jackson pressed a bowl of broth to his lips.

“I don’t understand,” Clarke said. “You had half as many like this yesterday.”

“Apparently A.L.I.E. let some people starve,” Abby growled. “Poor people who would’ve had to work to find food each day. Not enough time to scavenge when you’re doing the bidding of an evil AI.”
Clarke didn’t bother mentioning that she already knew that, or that she wasn’t the one who deserved to be snarled at. She knew her mom was on edge, still drowning in the guilt of what she had done while chipped.

“Yesterday we had people who collapsed because they couldn’t eat,” Abby went on, softer. “Now we have people who collapsed because they could. And we’re going to have more.”

Clarke’s brow creased as she attempted to prop the boy up enough for her to dribble water down his throat without him choking.

“That makes no sense,” Bellamy said, echoing Clarke’s thoughts.

“Refeeding syndrome,” said Abby. “Starving people suddenly have access to food and they eat too quickly. Their bodies can’t take it.”

Clarke closed her eyes for a moment as she tilted the boy’s head back. Wasn’t that exactly life on the ground? Even when something went right—even when starving people could eat—it only brought more death. “It’s okay,” she murmured to the boy. “That’s it, go slow.”

“I need more gauze, or the closest to it,” Abby said. “Bellamy?”

Bellamy went to search the mismatched baskets and boxes that lined the hut walls. “Uh, like this?” He held up a bandage for setting a splint.

“That’s too stiff,” Clarke said. With one hand under her patient’s shoulders and the other massaging his throat to ease a dribble of water down it, she twisted her neck to look around the hut. She had been here once before to visit Nyko with Lexa. Lexa had said she needed to inquire about the health of a few key warriors, but Clarke had known it was more than that. There were few people Lexa could trust enough to call friends, and Nyko was one of them.

She swallowed. Had been one of them.

Nyko’s hut was in a sorry state now as compared to then. Containers of supplies had been upturned by hasty searches, and dirty linens were piled in every corner. Crusted black smudges covered the floor all the way down one of Nyko’s previously tidy aisles of cots. The survivors in the tower were already more than the city’s healers could handle, and then there had been the influx of these sorts of cases.

“What about there?” Clarke nodded toward a metal chest that seemed to have a scrap of fabric hanging over one side.

Bellamy dug through it. “This stuff all looks the same.”

Clarke groaned. They needed the healers to return, even if they were only Nyko’s seconds still. This was their turf. When she wasn’t busy holding a little boy together, she would suggest that Abby be the one to make the house calls from now on.

When Clarke adjusted her grip to give him more water, the boy began to seize. Clarke sprang into action, eyes wide, and turned him on his side so he wouldn’t aspirate. He was thrashing so hard she feared he would topple the cot. “Mom!”

“Forget the gauze. We need medicine.” Abby left her patient in Jackson’s care and hurried to Clarke’s side.

Bellamy rifled through a wooden crate. “That’s not very specific. What am I looking for?”
“Help him,” Abby snapped, taking over Clarke’s hold.

Clarke darted around the cots to join Bellamy. “Glass vials maybe,” she said. “I don’t know.”

Abby wedged a strip of leather between the boy’s teeth to keep him from biting off his tongue. “Clarke!”

“There’s nothing here. Just supplies.”

Clarke racked her brain. The Trikru healer had left Arkadia just in time to avoid being imprisoned alongside his patients during Pike’s stint as chancellor, but Clarke hadn’t seen him in Polis since shortly after she’d returned to the city to champion Jus nou drein jus daun. He normally traveled with the commander’s army, which meant he should have been here in the capital. On a personal level, she hoped he had fled the city before A.L.I.E. As a leader, she really needed him here now.

Still, wherever he’d gone, Nyko wouldn’t have taken all his medicines and left the apprentice healers here with nothing. Then Clarke remembered. When she and Lexa had come in and announced themselves, Nyko had emerged from the curtain at the back of his hut. She had assumed it was his private quarters, but it was worth a shot.

“Hang on,” she said, to the seizing boy as much as to her mom.

She raced to the thick, tattered curtain and burst through, then skidded to a halt inside the cramped quarters. Unless Nyko enjoyed sleeping on a patient’s cot surrounded by medical apparatuses, this was not where he lived when he was in Polis. This was a private treatment room, no bigger than the commander’s wash room in the tower. In the center sat a bed just like the ones outside—only this one was seeped with black blood.

Clarke stumbled toward the cot, biting back a gag. The scent was overpowering in the small space. Her hands landed on the stiff linen, long since dried. She flinched back as if the crusted black blood might burn.

Was this…? Was it…?

Was it Lexa’s?

Clarke’s heart thudded painfully in her chest.

It couldn’t be Ontari’s blood. As soon as the elevator was operational, the pretender’s body had been carried straight from the throne room to the top of the tower, where it had been sent up in smoke for all to see. More than one Sky Person had argued they should feed Ontari to pauna instead, but Clarke had forbid it. They couldn’t risk the ire that might come from violating yet another Grounder tradition, no matter how undeserving the commander in question.

But maybe… maybe the blood belonged to one of the young Nightbloods. Could one have survived? Not Aden—Clarke’s stomach rolled—but one of the others? After all, she hadn’t counted the heads in Ontari’s gruesome display.

“What anything back there?” Bellamy called.

Clarke shook off the strange feeling that had settled in her bones. If a Nightblood had escaped the massacre, she’d know soon enough. But if she didn’t find Nyko’s concoctions soon, there would be yet another child on the list of people she couldn’t save.

She put her back to the cot and tried not to breathe through her nose. Along each wall sat narrow
wooden tables where Nyko had stacked slings, splints, and pots for sanitizing tools. There was the gauze they'd needed, hanging from a hook, but now was no time for wrapping cuts. At last Clarke’s eyes landed on a haphazard pile of opaque, midnight glass bottles. The chance these held an anticonvulsant was minuscule, but she lunged for them anyway. As her fingers closed around the first, she realized they were all uncorked. All empty.

“Shit,” she breathed.

Beside the vials was a chest of dozens of tiny drawers, each no bigger than a fist. She yanked them open two at a time. Herbs. Knives. Salves. Tools made of repurposed bits of plastic. Nothing useful. She pulled open the corner most drawer, then froze.

There was a commotion on the other side of the curtain—new sets of footsteps, followed by rapid Trigedas leng.

“Forget it, Clarke!” Abby called. “One of the healers has something.”

Clarke didn’t hear her.

There in the drawer was a single bullet, smeared with black blood.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Clarke tries to make sense of what she found.

Chapter Notes

My heart goes out to my fellow Americans today, and to everyone around the world whose lives will be made worse by our future commander-in-chief. Don't stop fighting, and ste yuj.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Clarke staggered out from behind the heavy curtain at the back of the healer’s hut. She had left the warped bullet behind, but she could still see it. She had turned from the blood-soaked linens, but she could still smell them.

She was dimly aware of one of Nyko’s seconds closing the eyes of the young boy who’d been seizing, and of how suddenly still his little body was.

Abby stood on the other side of the boy’s cot, fists clenched. “You didn’t think to mention this was poison?” she said to the healer, slamming a clear, empty vial down beside the boy. A rush of furious alphapheromones filled the hut.

“Em gonplei ste odon,” said the second—or so Clarke thought. The world around her was difficult to make out. Everything felt hazy and far away.

“He didn’t have a fight, he was a child,” Abby growled. “There might have been something for him. And you just—Clarke?”

Six sets of eyes turned on her—Abby’s, Jackson’s, Bellamy’s, and three apprentice healers’, who had apparently returned from their house calls around Polis.

Abby moved toward her, the boy forgotten for now. “What’s wrong, honey?”

Clarke opened her mouth to answer, but nothing came out. The only word her tongue seemed able to form was Lexa. When at last she found her voice, it was directed at the healers, not her mother. “Was the commander brought here after she died?”

And if she had been, why?

The seken who stood beside the boy exchanged a confused look with another who was unpacking supplies. The third, an omega, was focused on rubbing a salve into the chest of the mumbling old man Jackson had been treating earlier. “Heda,” the omega translated absently. “Don ste kamp raun hir?”

“Oh,” said the first apprentice—a beta. She spoke several quick sentences Clarke could only half
follow, then, “Sha.”

“Yes,” came the omega healer’s unnecessary translation.

Clarke’s stomach dropped into her knees.

Here. Lexa had been here. She, Clarke, had been waiting uselessly in the tower, and Lexa had been here.

“Our fos brought Heda here to prepare the body for burning,” the omega said.

Clarke bit back the bile that rose in her throat. Images of a cremation she never saw flashed in her mind. Auburn hair curling and disintegrating. A seven-circled tattoo bubbling and blackening. Bones crumbling to ash. The more she pushed the images away, the more they were replaced by the phantom stench of scorched flesh.

“Is that normal?” Clarke choke out.

The sekens exchanged another glance, and more Trigedasleng.

“We don’t know,” said the omega at last. He gestured for Jackson to take over the salve, then made his way to where Clarke stood near the curtain. “Nyko never mentioned it. I am sorry, Flamekeeper.” Indra had announced Clarke’s new title in a slapdash effort to maintain peace between Trikru and Skaikru after Ontari’s death, and it seemed word had traveled quickly.

Close up, Clarke could see the apprentice was even younger than she—and he seemed to be the oldest of the bunch. All three healers would have been children at the death of the last commander, which meant they couldn’t have been here in the hut to witness that commander’s final rites.

“Did you see her?” she asked quietly. She avoided looking at Bellamy or her mom, who had come to stand at her side. She couldn’t stomach the pity she knew she would find in their eyes.

Abby’s voice was tense with concern. “Clarke—”

“Did you?”

The omega shook his head. “Not me. Only Meela.” He sounded hesitant, like he couldn’t decide whether this new, untested flamekeeper should be privy to the details of Heda’s end. Clarke hardened her features, and the boy seemed to remember she was Wanheda, too. With a quick bow, he reached around her to hold open the curtain, then beckoned over Meela, the beta who had dosed the dying boy.

Clarke followed the two healers back into the cramped treatment room. The omega boy—Brend, Meela called him—repeated Clarke’s question in Trigedasleng.

“Sha,” Meela answered, looking at Clarke.

“She says she saw Nyko come into the hut and take Heda’s body behind the curtain,” Brend translated.

Clarke sucked in a sharp breath. Questions chased one another through her mind, three more taking shape for each she tried to answer. Why would Nyko have taken Lexa out of the tower and all the way here when he would have had to carry her back as soon as he was finished? How had Nyko gotten to Lexa in the first place? Why hadn’t Titus performed the funeral preparations himself? Wasn’t that the flamekeeper’s job? What kind of preparations were needed for a cremation, anyhow?
And if Nyko had retrieved Lexa’s body, and he had brought it here, then why—why—had the healer bothered to remove a bullet from a corpse?

“And you saw him take her back to the tower afterwards?”

Brend and Meela exchanged a few fast words.

“No. Meela says Nyko was back here until sundown, or maybe longer. He told her he was not to be disturbed. It must have been after Meela returned home for the night that he brought Heda’s body to the tower.”

Clarke’s mouth felt dry. She couldn’t tear her eyes from the blackened linens on the cot.

How had a lifeless heart pumped out so much blood?

A tender hand squeezed her shoulder, and Clarke jumped. Apparently her mom had slipped in through the curtain behind them. “Why don’t we go outside and get some air?” Abby said. “The patients are in good hands now. They’ll be okay for a few minutes.”

Clarke hardly heard her. She forced herself to take slow, deliberate steps to the table that held Nyko’s chest of drawers. She reached not for the chest, but for one of the thumb-sized indigo vials beside it. When she spoke, she kept her voice steady and calm. She didn’t dare reveal the wisp of foolish hope that had lodged in her chest—hope too dangerous to put a name to, even in her own mind.

“What are these?” she asked Brend.

He gave a little shrug. “The tonics used to purify the commander’s vessel before cremation?”

The corners of Clarke’s eyes pricked. That was all Lexa was to this boy. A vessel. “That’s the only thing kept in dark bottles like this?”

“Well, no.” Brend shifted his weight. “Nyko uses them for anything that is sensitive to light.”

“Well, what was this one?” She stepped into his personal space, holding the vial under his nose.

“Clarke,” her mom said. The warning fell on deaf ears.

Brend wrinkled his nose as he sniffed. “It’s…” His brow creased. He spoke quickly to Meela, who argued back and forth with him for a moment.

“Em hod jus op,” Meela told Clarke.

“It… stops blood,” said Brend. “I do not know the proper term in Gonas leng.”

“A procoagulant?” Clarke’s heart beat faster and faster until it felt like it was slamming against her breastbone. “It stops someone from bleeding?” Brend nodded. “What about the others?”

He shuffled past Clarke, his smooth omega smell rippling with confusion. He picked up each vial and took a whiff. “All the same.”

_all the same. All to stop bleeding._

Clarke felt as if the tornado whirling in her mind had taken on a physical presence. As if it might swirl around her and rip her off the ground at any moment. She leaned back to grip the edge of the narrow table for support.
“Could you two excuse us for a minute?” Abby asked the healers. The warmth of her voice disguised its alpha edge, but Brend and Meela bowed and slipped out just the same.

Abby put a hand on Clarke’s back. It was only then that she realized she’d stumbled forward, her fingers clenched in the bloodied linens on the cot.

“Mom.” Her voice broke.

“Oh, honey. It’s okay.”

“She was here, Mom.”

Abby brushed Clarke’s back with her thumb. “I know, baby.”

Clarke wasn’t sure who had told her mom about the nature of her relationship with Lexa, or exactly how much Abby knew. She hadn’t even told anyone—her friends had just seemed to figure it out on their own.

“I mean she was here. She was...” Clarke couldn’t say it. She couldn’t dangle her hope out in the open where it was sure to be clobbered and snatched away. But the words tumbled past her lips anyway. “She was alive when she was here.”

“Clarke—”

“I can smell her.” She hadn’t realized it until she said it, but it was true. Wasn’t that a faint trace of crisp forest she could detect beneath the rotting blood? Wasn’t that a hint of her own omega scent, now thin and faded, which Lexa had been doused in when Titus took his shot?

“That makes sense,” Abby said gently. “If her body was here, there could be traces left behind on the sheets.”

“Not two weeks after. Not unless she was alive and pumping out pheromones.” Clarke had no idea if that was true. She’d only been smelling people properly for a few months. It was instinct alone that drove her conviction. Instinct and preposterous, stuttering hope.

Abby stepped closer. “I know this is hard.” Worry had joined the pity in her voice. “But... you watched Lexa die. Remember?”

“I watched her lose consciousness,” Clarke corrected.

What if she had given up too soon? What if her trembling fingers had missed the whisper of a pulse? What if she had been wrong?

What if?

Abby spoke softly, as if she feared her words might knock Clarke over. “Even if Lexa was alive when she got here—Clarke, look at me. Even if she was alive for a few minutes...” She shook her head. “Honey.”

Clarke’s vision began to swim.

Her mother was right.

Of course she was.

There was a logical explanation for each of the revelations that had made her heart stammer with
disbelief. It really could be a Grounder tradition to bring Heda’s body to the healer before cremation. It could be sacrilegious to burn a commander’s body with the weapon of her greatest enemy still lodged inside. It could have even been Lexa, specifically, who had requested that her friend Nyko be the one who tended to her in death. The scent in the air could be a fantasy. The vials could have been for someone else. The blood on the sheets could have been drained by a healer’s hand, not pumped by a living heart.

Clarke staggered on her feet.

“Okay, it’s okay,” Abby soothed, holding her steady. “Let’s go outside for a sec, okay?”

Clarke wiped roughly at her eyes, but she let herself be led through the curtain and back into the hut.

“I’ll be right back,” Abby told Jackson, who had finished with the salve and was helping the seconds return the hut’s supplies to order.

Bellamy looked up from where he was standing at the little boy’s cot, now empty. “Clarke, you okay?”

Clarke nodded numbly. She stared straight ahead as her mother hurried her along.

How could she have been so foolish? Love wasn’t weakness, but this was. This inability to accept what she already knew—what she’d known for days that felt like decades.

Lexa was dead.

Lexa was dead, and Clarke had let another innocent person die because of her distraction.

She had to get a hold of herself. And yet...

The blood.

The bullet.

The smell.

Clarke stopped short, just before the hut door, and spun back toward Brend. “Did you see the cremation?”

He was using a mortar and pestle to pulverize barbed leaves into a paste. He looked up from his concoction, brow furrowed.

“The… fire,” she clarified. “Did you see it yourself? Were you in the tower?”

“Oh, yes, Fleimkepa.”

Clarke felt as if her lungs were strangling one another. Of course he had seen it. Of course people had watched Lexa burn. She nodded jerkily. “Tell me. Please. Describe it.” She needed to hear it for herself. She needed to know for sure, once and for all.

“Clarke,” her mom begged.

“Please, Brend.”

The crease in the omega’s forehead only deepened. He paused in his grinding. “Has Fisa Nyko made a mistake in his duties? Please, I know he meant no harm. I know he would have been there if
“No. No, I—” Clarke cleared her throat. “I just need to hear what happened. The next commander might want to know.”

He let out a breath of relief. “Oh. Well—”

“Wait. Nyko wasn’t there?” Clarke was doomed to be a fool forever, it seemed, because her stomach flipped. Her pulse began to race once more.

Brend looked miserable at what he’d let slip. “No, Fleimkepa. He had to leave Polis suddenly. It couldn’t be avoided. The alpha girl in the stables came to tell me, as he bid. I went to the tower in Nyko’s place.”

Clarke felt as if she’d been plunged into the icy water below Mount Weather. Nyko had been with Lexa, and then he had left Polis. Nyko had left. “Then what happened?” she managed to force out. “What did you do in the tower?”

“There was nothing to do but put Heda on the pyre. Nyko had already delivered the body, ready and wrapped up tight.”

“But you unwrapped her before you burned her. You saw her.” Clark was sure it was her heart that was being ground into unrecognizable mush under Brend’s pestle. She almost begged him to say yes—to recount every detail of Lexa’s frozen, bloodless face and put a stop to the madness swirling in her mind.

Brend looked affronted. “I would never, Fleimkepa. You must believe me. Heda was burned in her shroud, like all Trikru. We honored her. The general will tell you. Indra directed everything.”

Clarke felt dizzy.

This was all too much. Too much to mean nothing.

Nyko had vanished before Lexa was cremated. None of the healers had seen him take her body back to the tower. None of them had seen her face before the flames took her.

And that meant…

It meant…

“Thank you, Brend.” Abby’s voice came from out of nowhere.

The rest of the hut, too, jolted back into Clarke’s awareness. Jackson and Meela were still sorting supplies, but Bellamy was watching her with dark, worried eyes. The third apprentice cast surreptitious looks at her as she heaved a pot down from a high shelf.

“I’m sure you did everything just like Nyko would have wanted,” Abby said to Brend. “Clarke, let’s go outside.”

Clarke nodded, mute. She could feel her mother’s strain—could practically smell it—and she trailed after her.

As she stepped out of the hut door and onto the quiet street, a strange calm overcame her. Her breathing was even now. Her legs were steady. Her exhaustion had been replaced by an electric, white-hot energy that glowed beneath her skin and lit up every nerve.
“Mom,” she said when the door had shut behind them. It was both a plea and an I told you so. Both an order and a prayer.

“I heard.” Abby ran a hand through her hair. She paced in front of the door, heedless of the bloody puddles beneath her boots. The air was thick and stifling with her protective alpha pheromones.

“You can’t tell me there’s nothing to this.”

Abby stopped pacing. She opened her mouth to argue, then closed it again. They looked at one another for long, quiet moments, until Abby broke the silence. “It might not mean what you want it to mean.”

Though they stood inches apart, Clarke felt far away. As if nothing could reach into the stillness that had settled over her. Not right now. She nodded. “I know.”

“She could still be dead, honey.”

“I know.”

“I’m just—I worry.”

“I know, Mom.”

“I don’t want to see you hurt, that’s all.”

Clarke stared past her mom, out into the fading afternoon light that cast shadows over the broken city. “It can’t hurt more than now.”

Pain prickled through Abby’s scent, souring the air. Clarke knew her mom was thinking of the throne room and the scalpel. Of Jake in the airlock, and Clarke on the dropship, and a mountain of guilt, and everything always hurting, hurting, hurting.

She wanted to tell her mom that it wasn’t her fault. She understood that now. She wanted to take the burden of her pain away, for Abby had her own to bear.

But it had gotten too heavy to lift.

Chapter End Notes

Seken - Second
Em gonplei ste odon - His fight is over
Heda don ste kamp raun hir? - Was Heda here?
Sha - Yes
Fos - First
Fisa - Healer
Em hod jus op - It stops bleeding
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Clarke sets aside her hope to find the truth--or she tries.

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much to everyone who's stopped by to read so far, and especially to those of you who have shared your thoughts. One reader asked a good question on the last chapter: How did Nyko escape from Arkadia? In case anyone else is wondering the same thing, Nyko actually wasn't imprisoned with his patients. We last see him before the sick Grounders are interned, and later one of them says that "Nyko got out just in time." This wasn't very clear in canon, so I'll be sure to highlight it in an edit to the first chapter. But for those reading live, there you have it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Clarke’s boots crunched a steady rhythm in the gravel. Her eyes pointed straight ahead as she made her way from the healer’s hut to the tower, where Indra and other high-ranking warriors had set up a temporary base of operations for the restoration of Polis.

The eerie calm that had settled over Clarke as she’d stepped out of Nyko’s hut still remained. She felt as if she were peering into that blurry, overexposed screen where she and her father used to watch century-old sports games—as if she were watching someone else wind their way around shuttered market stalls, over dismantled crosses and piles of bloody, discarded chains. As if it were someone else marching toward the answer to a question she feared should be left unasked.

“Indra.”

Clarke came upon the general near the base of the tower, grunting orders at warriors who hustled to and fro. Some carried stretchers of the wounded, while others hauled wood and salvaged steel for the builders inside. Clarke suspected it was Indra, too, who had posted the warriors she’d seen on street corners all about the city. Someone needed to keep an eye out for disturbances, which could be early indicators that the Coalition was crumbling. Clarke supposed it was a good sign that those warriors were still at their posts, and Indra was still functioning as a glorified construction supervisor.

“Flamekeeper,” Indra greeted. Her voice carried a touch of irony at Clarke’s new title, but it was a world away from how she used to growl sky girl. Her wrists were still wrapped in the bandages Clarke had applied after Octavia helped her down from the cross, and it was obvious from their tattered state that the general hadn’t paid them any mind these last three days.

“Is there somewhere we can talk?” Clarke said.

“If you seek news of the clans, I have none.”

Indra had already shared what she knew of the clans the day before: Trikru, now under Indra’s
interim leadership, Sankru, and Podakru would back the Coalition without reservation. Floukru would, too, under Luna’s command, so long as no more blood was spilled in their name. The Glowing Forest and Rock Line clans would probably support a continued alliance, but only with a Nightblood firmly installed on the throne—for how else could they trust the Coalition’s leadership? As for Azgeda, King Roan was barely alive and had yet to awaken, though Abby was having him watched around the clock. The rest of the clans were big, glaring question marks that Clarke just couldn’t think about right now.

“It’s about the commander,” she said.

Indra narrowed her eyes, and Clarke got the feeling the general knew she wasn’t referring to some future Nightblood. “Over here.” Indra gestured to a tall pile of rubble a dozen paces away—the remains of the explosion inside the tower. She had taken two hobbling steps toward it, Clarke close behind, when Octavia darted out of the tower’s front doors.

“Fos, wait,” Octavia called. Her sheathed sword bounced against her back. “Let me help.”

Octavia tried to wedge her shoulder under Indra’s armpit, and it was a testament to the severity of the general’s injuries that she didn’t behead her seken then and there. She did growl at Octavia until the omega stepped back, rolling her eyes, and flashed her throat in a gesture of submission. In the end, Octavia settled for walking beside Indra and subtly providing her forearm as a balance—one Indra ferociously declined to use.

Octavia glared at Clarke as the three came to a stop on the far side of the rubble. “You seriously couldn’t have talked to her back there? She just had nails in her legs.”

“Quiet,” Indra scolded.

Clarke glared back. *We’ve all been hurt*, she wanted to say, staring into Octavia’s stormy eyes. But when her gaze flicked down to the scar of Lincoln’s mating bite on Octavia’s throat, she couldn’t bring herself to do it. Clarke knew what it was like to watch the person she loved be shot and killed. If she didn’t have the fate of a fragile world in her hands, wouldn’t she be breaking down just like Octavia?

Wasn’t she breaking down? Wasn’t that was this was—the very reason she was standing here behind a pile of cracked concrete and twisted rebar, about to speak madness to the Trikru general?

The calm that had carried Clarke away from her mother’s worried warnings and toward the city center had begun to evaporate. Slowly, she felt the tremors returning her chest. She felt her palms starting to get slick, and bubbles starting to pop in her stomach.

Indra seemed to sense her growing distress, or else she’d had enough unwanted help for one day. “Leave us, Seken,” she said to Octavia.

Octavia folded her arms and leaned back against the rubble, one leg bent at the knee to prop herself up. “No way. I’m—”

“Seken—” Indra started to growl.

“It’s fine,” Clarke said quickly. Her throat had begun to tighten up, and she feared that if she didn’t start talking now, she might lose the ability. “I need to ask you something about… about after I left Polis, and you cremated the commander.”

“Ask, then.”
Clarke could still smell her mother’s protective musk clinging to her clothing, and she shook her head to clear it. She needed to do this on her own. She needed to hear the general’s words, to learn the truth, without someone else’s pheromones clouding her mind. “Nyko’s seconds said you oversaw the ceremony.”

Indra grunted.

“And that the commander’s body was wrapped in a shroud.”

“These are not questions, Wanheda.”

Clarke sucked in a ragged breath. Her heart begged her to stop. To turn and walk away with a flicker of hope rather than let herself crumble under punishing reality. But if the hope in her heart would be false…. She ground her teeth, steeling herself. “You saw her, right?”

“Of course.”


Unlike the teenage healers, Indra immediately caught on to what Clarke was getting at. “It was Heda.” There was regret in her voice—a whisper of sympathy, even—but no room for doubt.

Clarke wanted to fall to her knees. She wanted to scream and sob and run back to her mother, who she desperately regretting making stay behind at the healer’s hut. But she couldn’t break down. Not here, and not yet. She still didn’t know.

“So you did see her face,” Clarke said, squaring her shoulders.

Indra worked her jaw. “There was no need. I could smell her.”

“Wait.” Clarke blinked, unable to believe what she was hearing. “Are you saying you didn’t see Lexa? You didn’t see her.” Now she almost did sink to her knees, but for a different reason. The flicker of hope inside her hadn’t been doused. On the contrary, it had been stoked into a crackling brush fire—as likely to raze a forest as to be stomped out. She caught the general’s arm, half for support and half out of stunned, fragile joy. “Indra, please.”

Indra looked like thunder as she pried Clarke’s fingers from her elbow. “No one would dare unsettle a commander ready for rest. I told you, it was unnecessary. I have known the commander since she was a child. I know her scent.”

“Smells can be faked,” Octavia said, sounding bored.

Clarke’s head whipped to the side. She’d almost forgotten Octavia was there.

The omega’s arms were folded over her chest, her head cocked at a defiant angle. “My mom would cover me in her pheromones when someone came to our cabin so they wouldn’t smell me. It lasted a couple days if I didn’t wash it off.”

Indra glared at Octavia, but Clarke jumped in before she could deny it. The fire in her chest felt like an inferno now. “She’s right. The smell could have been faked. Someone could have gotten hold of something that smelled like Lexa and—”

“Do not be a fool, sky girl. Others saw the commander’s body even if I did not.”

But that was just it. “No, Indra. They didn’t.”
“Who told you this?”

Clarke was no longer looking at Indra. She was pacing beside the rubble—two quick steps toward the tower, two quick steps back. Thoughts tumbled through her mind faster than she could process them. Mentally, she was already tearing through every cave in a hundred-mile radius of the city. Already searching every abandoned bunker and parking lot.

She forced herself to stop moving and take a breath. She had to think.

“Nyko’s apprentices did. They saw him bring Lexa behind a curtain in the healer’s hut, and Indra. Indra, she was alive when she was in there.”

Indra’s eyes widened. “The healers say this?”

“No, but—”

The general let out a grunt of dismissal.

She started to turn away, but Clarke gripped her arm once more. “I know, I know, but listen. I know she was alive. I could tell Nyko was treating her. And none of the seconds saw her after that. No one saw Nyko take her to the tower, and then he left Polis. He’s been missing since that night.”

Indra shook off Clarke’s hold. “And yet Heda was in the tower,” she said coolly.

“Was she?” Clarke’s heart was thumping so hard she was surprised she could hear herself speak. “Who saw her? Not you. Not the healer who came to carry the body from the altar to the pyre.”

*The body*, she thought for the first time. *The body*, not Lexa.

Indra huffed. “The altar was in the throne room. All the ambassadors were there. You were there, Wanheda.”

“I didn’t see any of them look under the sheet. Did you?”

Clarke herself hadn’t even looked. She had been so busy trying to bury her pain and save her people that she’d refused Aden’s offer to see Lexa. If only she had been strong enough, brave enough, to let him lift up the sheet draped over the altar and unwrap the shroud beneath, she could have seen that it wasn’t Lexa at all. She could have set off after the commander then and there, and so much heartache could have been avoided—not only for her, but for all of the Coalition. So many lives could have been spared.

Still, the selfish part of Clarke couldn’t bring herself to wish she’d pulled back those linens. If she had, everyone else would have seen it wasn’t Lexa, too. Ontari would have sent the mightiest Azgeda warriors after the wounded commander, and what if they had gotten there first?

Indra ground her teeth. “There were others.”

“How?” Clarke challenged. She could sense Indra’s conviction flagging.

The beta thought for a moment. “Lein and Alana. Guards in the tower. They watched the body while the pyre was prepared.” Her voice dropped to a low snarl. “It should have been Titus, *joken branwada*.”

Clarke’s pounding heart skipped a beat at the mention of other potential witnesses. Witnesses who could demolish her hope with hardly more than a nod. “Where are they now?”
“Alana’s dead,” Octavia said. She picked at her nails, which were caked with dried blood. “She was one of the climbers. Fucking Pike probably fucking shot her.”

Indra peered between her second and Clarke. She flexed her jaw like she was wrestling with words she didn’t want to speak aloud.

“What?” Clarke demanded.

“Lein is also dead,” Indra admitted. “The elevator explosion.”

Clarke’s heart resumed its thunderous rhythm. There was no one left who could deny the hazy chain of events that had begun to take shape in her mind. No one left who could tell her she was wrong. Not in Polis, anyway. “Then Nyko is the only one who knows what happened.”

Nyko was the one she had to find.

Clarke burst into the stables with more force than she knew was wise if she wanted to keep a low profile. She was lucky that only equine eyes darted up to watch her skid to a stop in the hay.

“Hello?” she called into the dim, cavernous space. “Hei?”

Soft nickers were the only reply.

“Shit,” she muttered.

Indra stepped into the barn close behind her, followed by a stomping, sullen Octavia. The general had insisted on accompanying Clarke to the stables at the city limit, where the healer Brend had said Nyko was last seen. Clarke didn’t know why, since Indra’s hesitant, contemplative silence had quickly changed back to overt disbelief—which was to say nothing of her anger at Clarke for sullying the commander’s memory with such foolish doubts.

Indra had come to see her fail, Clarke knew. It was just one more reason why she couldn’t.

“No one is here,” Indra growled, as if that settled the matter for good. “Let’s go.”

Desperate, Clarke glanced about for any sign of human life. There. “Where did this water come from, then?” Near each horse sat a full wooden pail with bits of dust and straw floating on top. If no one had been here to tend the horses since A.L.I.E., they would have been bone dry.

Clarke hurried through the stable and down every aisle of rough-hewn stalls. She tried to tune out the warm, sweaty stink of animal to discern if there were any people here, but her nose could make out nothing but horse and hay. Then, in the second-to-last aisle, she finally caught a whiff of alpha.

An alpha.

Her breath caught.

Could it be? Could Lexa—?

The backs of her knees began to sweat. Her muscles were pulled tight as bowstrings as she rounded the stall in question and threw open its wooden gate.
“Joken—jok!” cried a young voice. Clarke jerked back with surprise, while the owner of the voice ricocheted into the front leg of a massive stallion she’d been crouched beside. A stack of iron horseshoes toppled over with a clanking thud.

Clarke winced. “Sorry.”

Of course it wasn’t Lexa. Of course it wasn’t. If Clarke had given even a second’s thought to the smell she’d caught, she would have known it belonged to a stranger. The last hours had made her rash, and she squeezed her eyes shut for a moment to center herself. When she opened them again, she could see that the alpha she had startled was a girl of thirteen or fourteen, probably recently presented, with tight dark braids and bright eyes.

She stared up at Clarke from where she’d toppled into the straw. A slow smile spread across her face, and then she started to laugh.

Clarke managed a weak smile. “Sorry,” she said again, holding a hand out to the young alpha girl.

The alpha girl, Clarke realized. That was who Brend had said delivered the message from Nyko the day Lexa was shot.

“Ai laik Klark.” She pointed at her chest. “Indra, over here,” she called over her shoulder.

“I’m Keit.” The girl grinned as she took Clarke’s offered hand and hopped up. “I’m will be warrior. I’m learn Gonasleng.”

“Good.” Clarke swallowed. “Good, because I have a question for you, Keit.”

“And I’m might have…” Her eyebrows scrunched. When she landed on the right word, her grin returned. “Answer. For right price.”

Clarke felt a cloud of alpha pheromones surround her, but they were so mild and undeveloped that they hardly even made her skin prickle. The horse sneezed, and Keit glowered at him. Under other circumstances, Clarke might have laughed.

“Goufa!” Indra growled. She arrived at the stall’s open gate with Octavia in tow, eyes blazing as she sniffed at the air. “What did you do?”

Clarke held back a half-smile at Keit’s petrified expression and the way the her boots clicked together.

“Em laik Fleimkepa,” Indra snapped, pointing at Clarke.

The poor girl’s eyes got as big as the stallion’s. The hopeful future warrior obviously recognized the general—and if she recognized her, she probably also knew about the distaste Indra harbored for alphas who used anything but their minds or their swords to get what they wanted.

“It’s okay, Indra. We were just making a deal,” Clarke said. The young alpha looked to her, clearly panicked about what Clarke might reveal. She released a twinge of calming omega pheromones, and everyone’s posture relaxed just slightly—Indra’s clearly against her will. “Keit, how about if you answer my question, I’ll make sure the general doesn’t end your fight.” She let a small smile break through. “Sound okay for a price?”


“My question is about Nyko, the healer.” Clarke talked slowly to let Keit’s mental translations catch
up. She spoke strong Gonasleng for one so young, but it was plain she was still learning. “I spoke to one of his seconds, Brend.”

Keit’s cheeks colored, and her alpha scent morphed into something embarrassed and hormonal. Clarke suddenly wondered if Brend had received Nyko’s message not because he was the highest-ranking second, but because the stable girl had a crush.

“Brend told me that Nyko had to leave Polis, but before he left he gave an alpha girl in the stables a message. A message to deliver to the healer’s hut.”

Keit nodded eagerly. “Yes. I’m alpha. Message for second go to tower instead Nyko.”

“Instead of Nyko,” Indra corrected, a scowl on her face.

“Why?” Clarke said.

“Instead of Nyko,” Indra corrected, a scowl on her face.

“Why?” Clarke said.

“Why? Clarke said. “Em left Polis.”

“Instead of Nyko,” Indra corrected, a scowl on her face.

“Why?” Clarke said.

“Why?”

Keit frowned as she thought. It was clear that Nyko’s trip hadn’t been the focus of her attention when she was tasked with delivering a message to the omega boy at the healer’s hut. “I think… supplies.” She held up one finger with a look of relief. “Yes, healing supplies for villages. Nyko had cart. He asked one horse for him, one horse for cart.”

Clarke’s eyes widened. She glanced to Indra, who looked stiffer than she’d ever seen. “He had a cart?” Clarke said. “Nyko left Polis with a cart? What was on it?”

Keit eyed her like she was dumber than a pile of a hundred horseshoes. “Supplies,” she repeated.

Indra’s forehead creased with deep, frustrated lines. “Trikru’s only healer left to deliver supplies when he was needed at the conclave? Why would he do this?”

“He wouldn’t.” Clarke’s entire body seemed to vibrate. She struggled to remember to breathe. “What exactly was on the cart, Keit?”

Indra watched the stable girl with the rapt, eagle-eyed interest Clarke thought she reserved for war councils alone. Even Octavia had stopped sucking her teeth and was listening intently. Clarke felt as if three lifetimes passed before the alpha answered.

“I do not see.” Keit turned up her palms. “Cart was covered of linen, to protect for travel.”

Indra sucked in a sharp breath. Clarke sank back against the wooden gatepost behind her, her hands braced on her knees. She shook her head in disbelief. “It’s real,” she whispered.

Her foolish, fantastical hopes were real. Nyko had taken Lexa from the tower. He had treated her wounds in the healer’s hut. He had put her on a covered cart and spirited her out of Polis.

Tears filled Clarke’s eyes. Her heart stuttered, ached, soared.

All of this meant Lexa was still…
It meant Lexa could still be…

It meant there was a chance… A *chance* she was still…

*Alive.*

---

**Chapter End Notes**

*Fos* - First  
*Seken* - Second  
*Joken branwada* - Fucking fool  
*Hei* - Hello  
*Ai laik Klark* - I’m Clarke  
*Joken jok* - Fucking fuck  
*Goufa* - Child  
*Em laik fleimkepa* - She’s the flamekeeper  
*Em* - He (or she)

---

I promised a slow burn, and I will deliver ;) Things are starting to heat up, though, and I hope you'll stick around to see what Clarke discovers. As always, I'd love to hear what you think and/or if there are particular aspects of this world you'd like me to expand on in future chapters.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Clarke tries to keep all the balls in the air.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay on this one! Blame Thanksgiving. In the spirit of the holiday, a big thanks to everyone who’s taken a second to share comments. This is my first foray into this sort of world, so hearing from you guys is so encouraging. Thank you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Clarke stood hunched against the horse stall’s wooden post for several long, silent seconds, until she could trust her voice not to crack. She was vaguely aware that she’d lost control of her pheromones—that relief and fear and desperation swirled around her, thickening the air with omega longing. If Indra had had any lingering doubts about the nature of Clarke’s relationship with the commander, she didn’t anymore.

“I need a horse,” Clarke said at last. Her voice still cracked.

She glanced at Indra as she straightened up, prepared to strike down each of the general’s arguments with the full force of Wanheda. But Indra gave her none.

“I have to know,” she pressed.

Indra set her jaw. She looked as if she’d seen a ghost. “We all must know.”

Clarke felt overcome by those four small words. She stepped into Indra’s personal space and enclosed her in a haphazard embrace. “Thank you,” she muttered, eyes prickling. Indra shook her off with a soft snarl, but Clarke hardly noticed.

The general believed. Someone other than her believed.

“What have to know?” the stable girl asked.

Clarke turned to look at the alpha girl, who she had almost forgotten was there in the stall with them. Now that her life no longer seemed to be in danger from a furious Trikru warrior, Keit bent to pick up her scattered horseshoes.

Clarke knew she couldn’t tell her the truth. Perhaps she had said too much to too many already, and Indra or Octavia would let something slip to someone who shouldn’t know that the commander might be alive.

There was a reason Nyko had sneaked away with Lexa under cover of night instead of shouting to the world that the commander still lived. Others besides Titus had wanted Lexa dead, and Clarke couldn’t risk any of them learning what she had learned. She couldn’t gamble with Lexa’s safety—
not now that she’d found out there might be something to risk. And a small part of her that wasn’t wrapped up in a vision of launching herself into the alpha’s arms knew that there was more at stake than just Lexa. There was the safety of her people, too, and of the citizens of the Coalition, and maybe even of humanity itself.

If Lexa was alive, everything would be different. If Lexa was alive, every question the clans were wrestling with was the wrong one. They didn’t need to know who. They needed to know where.

“My mother is a doctor,” Clarke said quickly, hoping the truth in the lie would make up for her pause. “A healer. She’s been working with Nyko’s seconds, but they’re running out of supplies. I need to find out where Nyko went. Do you know?” She gave Keit a tight but encouraging smile. “Brend said you were really helpful before when you brought him that message from Nyko.”

Keit flushed. One of the horseshoes slipped from her fingers, and she fumbled to catch it. “He said?”

Clarke struggled to keep her voice free of the impatience that scorched her insides. “Yeah. Brend mentioned you specifically. So can you help us—me and Brend? Do you know where Nyko was going?”

It wasn’t Clarke’s most polished performance when it came to manipulating an alpha, but it seemed to work on this miniature one. Keit puffed out her narrow chest. “Of course I can. Tell to Brend, Nyko travel north.”

“North,” Indra repeated, skeptical. Clarke could guess what she was thinking: Azgeda would hardly be a wise place for any Trikru to hide, never mind for the wounded commander.

“Sha,” Keit said. “Nyko said very clear. If anyone ask, he travel north.”

Clarke nodded, crestfallen. If Nyko had made a fuss over telling one of Polis’s stable hands that he was heading north, that was the one direction they could be sure he hadn’t gone in. “He didn’t mention anything else? The name of a village, maybe? Or a person?”

Keit shook her head.

“There are possibilities,” Indra said vaguely. “Goufa, two horses.” She ignored the rise of Clarke’s eyebrows at the word two.

Keit took Indra’s gruff words for the dismissal they were. She bid a quiet farewell to the stallion whose shoes she never got to put on, then slipped from the stall with a curious glance back at her visitors.

“I’m going alone,” Clarke argued the second Keit was out of earshot. The elation she’d felt a few moments ago had given way to a white-knuckled urgency to do something.

Lexa’s broken body had been taken from Polis, and she, Clarke, had done nothing. She had traipsed after the wrong Nightblood, tried to solve the wrong problems, and most recently, had spent days playing fixer-upper in the tower while she searched for the courage to save the world again.

She had already wasted more than two precious weeks, and every additional minute felt like a lifetime. Just because Lexa had been alive under the linens on Nyko’s cart didn’t mean she was alive now. It didn’t mean she would be forever.

“Traveling alone is stupidity, sky girl, even for you.”

Octavia snorted her agreement, though her eyes didn’t soften from their now-permanent stony glare.
She went to stroke the nose of the big black horse, which she obviously found to have more sense than Clarke.

Clarke crossed her arms at Indra. “Look, would I rather bring along a whole band of warriors and as many trackers as I can find? Of course. Yes.” She lowered her voice. “But no one else can know about this. No one. Too many people know already.” Clarke kept her gaze from straying to the angry, mourning omega at the other side of the stall, but only just.

“So you do have some brains,” Indra said, eyes shrewd. “Of course we will tell no one.”

“Well, it can’t be you. The Coalition needs you here, which means we all need you here.”

“Not me.”

“Then—?”


Octavia’s jaw hung wide. “What?”

Suddenly Clarke understood.

“Go now,” said Indra, “and bring Lincoln’s book.”

Clarke could smell the spike of anger in Octavia’s grief-muddled scent. She didn’t have time for this. “Indra, no, it’s fine, I—”

“Are you kidding me?” Octavia, looking between Clarke and her mentor. “There’s an entire city of people out there whose lives turned to shit because of us. Again. If you guys want to chase after a fantasy, fine. But I’ll—”

“You will serve your people,” Indra growled. “Your people need their commander, and your flamekeeper needs a warrior to protect her in her search. You are a Trikru warrior, are you not?”

Octavia threw her shoulders back and clenched her jaw. She knew she was being manipulated—Clarke could tell. But that didn’t make her immune to Indra’s words. “That isn’t going to work,” she ground out, despite the flush of her cheeks.

“I do not need it to work, Second. You will go because I order it.”

Indra’s gaze flicked to Clarke’s. The shadow in her eyes made Clarke wonder if perhaps the general shared her concerns about whether Octavia could remain silent about their discovery if left to her own devices in Polis. She trusted Octavia, she did, but losing a mate could make people do crazy things—like slicing open Pike’s leg when he was one of the only things standing between you and a thousand mindless, bloodthirsty warriors. Any argument against Octavia joining her died in her throat. The other omega was a wildcard she couldn’t risk having out of her sight.

“I do need you, O,” she said, softening Indra’s order. “No one else can find out about this, and Indra has to stay here. That means you’re the only one who can help me.”

Octavia sucked her front teeth for a long, glaring moment, then snorted. “Glad to know I’m such a top choice.”
Clarke borrowed a horse from Keit to gallop back to the city center, where she made her preparations in a frenzied haze she knew she would have trouble remembering later.

She had little to pack. There was nothing of her own she cared for apart from what she carried in her pockets—the Flame and the gear-shaped ornament that had once decorated Lexa’s brow. She might need medical supplies, though, which led her back to the healer’s hut.

As she reached to yank open the hut door, it swung out from the inside. A man nearly collided with her as he stepped out into the brisk late afternoon.

Clarke blinked up at the man and found a familiar face. Marcus Kane.

Fuck.

“Oh, Clarke. Apologies.” He put a steadying hand on her shoulder, then frowned. “Are you all right?”

Clarke pressed her fingers to the inside corner of one eye. It wasn’t as if she’d forgotten about Kane and his meeting with the clan ambassadors—not exactly. But she’d had a few other things to think about these last couple of hours.

As Kane stepped aside to let her into the hut, his face taut with worry, she tried to imagine what he must see. Her hair was windswept and tangled from her ride. There was probably a wild drive in her eyes, which couldn’t be doing much to distract him from the dried tear tracks she knew must stain her cheeks. She made herself take a deep, steadying breath. “I’m fine,” she said. She forced a smile, but her mind churned with the responsibilities Kane’s presence reminded her of. “Can you stay for a sec? Wait here.”

She stepped into the hut, temporarily pushing Kane and the ambassadors to the back of her mind.

“Clarke,” her mom said with surprise. Abby looked up from her newest patient. “What’s wrong?”

Nothing, she wanted to shout. Finally nothing, but somehow still everything.

“I was right,” she said instead. She made herself take slow, measured steps to where Abby was attempting to coax broth down the throat of a woman who was more bones than flesh. Brend and Nyko’s other apprentices were busy at other cots, and Bellamy was long gone, but Clarke lowered her voice anyway. “What I thought…” She swallowed. “It’s true.”

Abby’s face turned from confusion to sympathy. “Clarke—”

Clarke held up a hand. She couldn’t listen to her mom’s doubts right now, for her own were torturous enough. Under other circumstances, her alpha mother might have bristled at the blatant command. But Abby’s dominance was clearly still muted by the memories of what had happened in the throne room, and she closed her mouth contritely. “I need supplies,” Clarke went on. “Anything you can spare, but especially anything that will stop bleeding.”

Abby started to speak, then stopped, then started again. “Honey, if she’s still bleeding, she’s gone.”

Clarke flinched, but she knew her mom was right. “Okay. Fine. Antibiotics, then.” If Nyko had managed to close Lexa’s wound, infection was the next danger. That had to be why she hadn’t returned yet, didn’t it? Because she was still fighting for her life, not because she had already lost it.
“I’ll see what I have left,” Abby said uncertainly. “When are you leaving?”

“Now.”

Before her mother could argue, Clarke turned on her heel and returned to Kane, who still stood in the open doorway with his hands in the pockets of his pants.

“How did it go?” she asked him.

Kane sighed. “About as well as we thought. Most of the ambassadors believe Skaikru brought the chips to Polis intentionally. I think I convinced some of them, but…” He shook his head. “At the very least, they’re still nervous to attack Arkadia.”

“And the Coalition?”

“Intact, for now. There’s too much uncertainty for any one clan to stage a coup. The ambassadors don’t even seem to know how many of their own warriors survived, never mind how those of the other clans fared. But things will become clearer in time. Some of the clan leaders are already on their way to the capital. Sooner or later someone will grab for power unless there’s a commander on the throne. Maybe even if there is one, depending on who.”

Clarke’s mind raced. The clans wouldn’t take kindly to one rising above the others, and then there would be war. “How long?”

“Until the Coalition splinters, or until the clans turn on Skaikru?”

She glanced at her mom, who was packing odds and ends into a leather satchel. “I have to go away for a while.” She turned back to Kane. “How long do I have before I’m too late?”

“There’s—” Marcus sputtered, caught off guard. “There’s no way to say. Where are you going?”

“How long?” she pressed. She knew Kane couldn’t give her a real answer—no one could. But she needed one anyway. She needed a way to convince herself she was doing the right thing.

He ran a hand through his shaggy hair. “I don’t know. A couple of days before the scuffles start? A couple of months? I don’t know, Clarke.”

“I need you to get me two weeks.”

“Clarke—”

“Work with Indra. Show the clans we all need to be allies right now. Send the rest of our people back to Arkadia if you have to, but don’t let the Coalition fall. Tell the ambassadors… tell them that the flamekeeper commands that the Sky People be included in the Coalition until a commander ascends and decides otherwise. If you can keep them arguing about Skaikru, they won’t have time to turn on each other.”

“But—”

“Just do it.” Clarke didn’t have time to convince him, or to regret the massive responsibility she was thrusting onto his shoulders. Most of all, she didn’t have time to let her mind slow down enough to think about the risk she was taking in leaving. She had to go, and not only for her own heart. If they were to have any chance of averting a second nuclear holocaust, they couldn’t be fighting a civil war at the same time—and while Clarke couldn’t singlehandedly hold the Coalition together at its seams, Heda could. She wasn’t abandoning her people by taking off into the forest after Lexa. She was
saving them.

She returned to her mom for the satchel, but she found herself pulled into a hug instead. Abby squeezed and squeezed, until Clarke was worried that tears would start leaking from her eyes again. She stepped back before she could start to tremble with the nerves that roiled in her stomach.

“I have to go,” she warned.

Abby only smiled, watery and tender. “Jake would have come after me, too, you know. Screw the council and all the rest. You were always so much like him. I should have been more like you both.”

“Mom—”

“It’s okay.” She smiled again. “Really. You’ve given up everything, and now you finally have a minute to breathe. Take it. Go. We’ll be okay for a while.”

Clarke knew her mother was trying to soothe her, but each word wedged splinters of guilt further under her skin. She didn’t have a minute to breathe, and her people—Grounder and Skaikru alike—were not going to be okay. But no one knew that except her.

She made a flash decision, then prayed like hell it was the right one. When she spoke again, she forced her voice to sound light and casual. “Actually, can you come with me to the back room for a second before I go?”

There behind the curtains of Nyko’s private treatment room, Clarke wrung her hands. She took a deep breath and tried to focus on the trace scents of forest—living, breathing forest—beneath the stench of dried blood.

“I already packed everything I could,” Abby said, glancing around the room with confusion.

“It’s not that. Listen, Mom.” Clarke licked her lips. She had to leave, but that didn’t mean she had to leave her people with nothing to go on. “I need you to do something for me, but you can’t tell anyone. Can you promise that? If not, it’s okay. I’ll—” She didn’t know what she would do, but she knew the only way to ensure her mother’s silence was for Abby to make that choice herself. “I’ll figure out something else. But you’re the one I want to trust.”

Abby frowned. “What is it?”

“Do you promise? No matter what I say, no matter what happens, you’ll keep this quiet?”

Her mother released an exasperated breath. “Shouldn’t we all be working together as a group, Clarke? Isn’t that what you’ve been saying this whole time?”

“Yes,” Clarke said tightly. “And we will, but not yet. Please, Mom.”

Abby’s worried frown deepened. “Okay. Okay, I promise.”

Clarke shifted her weight. It was a risk to ask what she was going to ask—she knew that. But so was not asking. She took a deep breath and plowed on. “There’s a library in the floors underneath the tower.”

She had stumbled upon it during her captivity as Wanheda, but Lexa had brought her there again weeks later. The alpha had worn such an eager, expectant smile as they descended into the dim basement that Clarke hadn’t been able to bring herself to admit that she’d already been there. When the elevator doors opened, she’d sneezed, and Lexa had jumped—and Clarke hadn’t stopped
smirking at her for the rest of the day. Most Grounders couldn’t read—Lexa and the Nightbloods were the only ones she knew of who could—and dust had caked every tattered magazine, every disintegrating map, every salvaged book. Thousands and thousands and thousands of them.

“I need you to go there—not right this second,” Clarke said to her mom, cutting off the argument she knew was coming, “but as soon as you can. Whenever you can. I need you to sort through what’s down there and figure out where the nuclear power plants were at the time of the war. Make a list, then cross off all the areas we already know were destroyed. There should be at least twelve plants that survived.”

Abby’s eyes had widened at the word *nuclear*. “How do you know that? And why? What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” Yet. “I just need you to find them, okay? It’s important. But Mom—”

“I know, I can’t say anything.” Abby pinched the bridge of her nose. “Clarke, tell me this isn’t as serious as it sounds.”

“It might not be.” It sounded feeble even to Clarke’s own ears.

Her mom pursed her lips. “It would be faster with Raven, you know. She could access what’s left of the Ark’s network. How do you even know that kind of information is in Polis?”

“I don’t. But this is our best option right now. You can’t tell Raven. You can’t tell anyone.” Clarke knew she would eventually need their resident expert on things that went *boom*, but there were so many steps between now and then. There were so many hurdles to jump that she had to put them from her mind, or else she might just lie down and wait for the end to come. What kept her going now was the thought that maybe—*maybe*—she wouldn’t have to jump them alone. “When I was down there I saw all kinds of stuff. Textbooks, manuals, newspapers. We’re close to an Old Earth capital, and we know they kept archives all over. The Grounders collect whatever they find, they just don’t know what most of it means.”

In fact, Clarke had mourned the many, many books she had seen in the library that might have helped the Grounders defeat Mount Weather, if only they had known what to look for. Just because the commander could decipher the words on a page didn’t mean she could understand the contents of every book. Clarke had run her fingers over each crumbling spine, but she hadn’t had the heart to tell Lexa how they might have saved her people.

“This sounds like a long shot, Clarke. And I have patients to treat.”

*You’ll have more if you don’t help me,* she wanted to growl. But she couldn’t. It was her choice—her fault—that Abby didn’t understand the gravity of their situation. It was her mother she needed to appeal to now, not Doctor Griffin. “Mom, if you want me to have a second to breathe, this is what I need.”

Abby watched her for several long seconds, and gradually the annoyance on her face turned to sadness. She took Clarke’s hands in her own. “I wish this wasn’t what you had to worry about.”

No so long ago, Clarke would have known that Abby meant because she was an omega. Because sweet, silly omegas shouldn’t have to make their brains work so hard when there were alphas around to do their thinking for them. Now, though, there was respect alongside the worry in Abby’s voice. Now she spoke mother’s love, not alpha control.

Despite everything their people had suffered on the ground—despite all she had gained and then lost
—Clarke still wasn’t sorry they had come.

She squeezed her mom’s hands. “Me too.”

Her mom squeezed back. “Maybe someday.”

Clarke thought of another pair of tearful, hopeful eyes—green, not brown. She thought of owing nothing more to her people, and of meeting again, and of a woman who maybe, somewhere, was waiting for her.

“Yeah. Maybe someday.”

Chapter End Notes

*Sha* - Yes
*Goufa* - Child
*Seken* - Second
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Clarke and Octavia set off, simultaneously together and apart.

Chapter Notes

I had hoped the holidays would give me more time to write, but alas the opposite turned out to be true. Thanks for sticking with me through the long wait!

Clarke and Octavia rode out of Polis with the fading sunlight at their backs. Thanks to the stable girl, Clarke knew Nyko hadn’t taken the commander north—but that was about all she could be sure of. Beyond that, Lexa might be anywhere. Clarke tried not to think of the size and shape of anywhere, lest the impossibility of her task knock her from her horse.

At least when she had left Polis in search of Luna, she’d had something real to go on. A specific direction. A meaningful sprig of leaves. A guide who had given Octavia the confidence to risk being poisoned, even from his grave. Now Clarke had only guesses and prayers, and an entire continent of possibilities.

Before she and Octavia had set out, Clarke had returned to the stables to find Indra using the maps in Lincoln’s sketchbook to mark the many hideouts sprinkled across the Coalition, and Octavia looking as if each pencil stroke was being carved into her very skin. Clarke had quickly offered a replacement for Lincoln’s precious pages—an old, tattered first aid manual that her mom had stuffed into her leather satchel, apparently due to a lack of actual medical supplies to fill it. Indra had scowled at having to draw the remaining maps from scratch, but Clarke suspected that saving Lincoln’s book from further desecration was the only reason Octavia was riding beside her in stony silence rather than outright fury.

Clarke’s experience with Old Earth films had led her to believe that springtime on the ground would be warm and green and full of sparkling new life, but the reality was a good deal drearier. She hadn’t seen the sun itself since she’d arrived in Polis with Roan—just an opaque, low-hanging sky that changed from ash white to starless black and back again each day. Though it was only early evening, a wet chill had already settled into her bones. Indra had scolded her for not dressing more warmly for her journey, but Clarke had refused to waste time returning to the city center for a thicker jacket. If Lexa could survive out here in the woods injured and broken, then Clarke could stand the cold for a little while.

She and Octavia had barely passed the weapons drop outside the city when they reached the first spot Indra had thought might harbor a wounded commander. The general had lent Clarke her own leather gloves, which was probably the only reason her frozen fingers consented to bend as she tugged on the reins to stop her horse.

“This is it,” Octavia said, glancing down at Lincoln’s book. “Two oaks crossed on the right, a curved pine on the left.”
Octavia swung down from her saddle with practiced ease, while Clarke was reduced to an undignified slide, one boot snagged in a stirrup. She tried not to think of how different riding with Lexa had been, that day they’d thought they would bring peace to Arkadia and had found a massacre instead.

When they’d set off from Polis, Lexa had knelt beside Clarke’s horse and offered her own cupped hands to catch Clarke’s foot and hoist her into the saddle. It had been all she could do to stay steady, watching Lexa make herself small like that. No alpha on the Ark would ever have taken a knee at her side, yet Lexa sank down without a second thought, with pleasure, for a task a guard could have done instead. Lexa’s fingers had lingered on her thigh as she settled on her horse, and Clarke had tried to tell herself that the shiver down her spine was from the wind. Deep inside, she had thought that day might be a beginning. But it had turned out to be the beginning of the end.

With her heart in her throat, Clarke shook off the stiffness of riding and followed Octavia to the concealed cave Indra had sketched. It was one of dozens the general had marked on the maps, some Lincoln’s and some her own, which spanned most of the Coalition in a hundred mile radius from Polis—or so Clarke guessed, based on her rudimentary knowledge of Old Earth geography.

Some of the Xs were hideouts for the commander if she had to travel in secret, while others could shelter entire bands of warriors caught in extreme weather or the Mountain’s now-defunct acid fog. Still others had been built in times of inter-clan warfare, and it was anyone’s guess which of those still stood.

“Indra said this one is just an in-between,” Octavia said. Her gruff tone told Clarke not to get her hopes up. “Like if the commander leaves the city under cover and needs somewhere to wait until dark.”

Clarke knew, too, that it wouldn’t necessarily be good news to find Lexa in one of the hideouts very near to Polis. If the alpha had recovered in any significant way, then surely she would have moved on by now—either back to Polis, which Clarke knew was not the case, or onward to some other destination.

Still, her heart hammered as she cleared the thorny brush that hid the narrow entrance to the cave. She could hardly breathe as she squeezed through the branches and into the hole. She could hardly feel the thorns that pricked at her skin, or the leaves that scraped her face, or the cold, dusky twilight at her back. When at last she stood hunched in the cramped burrow and her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she found…

Nothing.

Clarke’s heart sank. She took a gulping breath to refill her empty lungs, but the dank air tasted bitter on her tongue.

“Candles,” Octavia said dryly, crowding in at Clarke’s side.

Two unlit candle stubs sat on a flat rock at the back of the damp cave. Beside the rock was a dagger, ideal for defending a shallow space, and beside the dagger was a rusty jar.

That was all.

“At least someone thought of food,” Octavia said, bending to reach for the jar. When the chipped glass caught the fading light, Clarke could see it was full of dried fruit.

Clarke had forgotten to pack anything to eat in her frenzy to leave Polis, much to Octavia’s chagrin.
Octavia had brought several fruits in her own pack, and Indra had rummaged up a few rations of nuts and preserved meat, but Clarke hadn’t been willing to wait for Keit the stable girl to go fetch anything more. She would hunt if she had to, she’d told Indra, but she would not wait another second to set out after Lexa.

Octavia jimmyed open the jar and sniffed at its contents, the ever-present glower still on her face. She pulled out a leathery yellow mass and tore off a strip with her teeth. “So?” she asked around her mouthful. “Can you smell her in here or what?”

Clarke drew another long breath through her nose, praying for any slight indication that Lexa had been here—for any minuscule clue about the state she’d been in, or where she had gone next.

It was useless.

If Lexa had ever visited this cave, it was long ago. The only scents that remained now were the stale reek of algae and Octavia’s own omega sweetness, tinged with anguish.

Clarke could relate.

They stuck to the forest and away from the roads, as Indra had instructed. They encountered only two other people that evening—a harmless-looking father and daughter who’d been stranded in Polis during Ontari’s reign and were making their way to family near the southeast border of Azgeda. When the father asked what brought them into the woods, Octavia told him the story Indra had provided: the new flamekeeper had gotten fed up with her scouts’ failure to bring a single Nightblood to the capital, so she’d decided to ride out and find the next commander on her own.

Clarke admired Indra’s commitment to lies that were technically true, but she knew this one could only work for so long. Sooner or later gossip would spread about the flamekeeper’s unusual undertaking, and people would start to wonder why Clarke never seemed to check for black-blooded children in the villages, only in odd corners of the forest.

She and Octavia made it to two more hideouts east of Polis before the sun abandoned them—one another cave, and the other a bunker similar to the one Finn had once found. Both were as empty as the first. Clarke found not a drop of black blood, not a single stray auburn hair, not one intoxicating whiff of musky, steely alpha.

When it became too dark to see the ground beneath their stirrups, Octavia drew her horse to a stop near the gurgling sound of a small brook. Clarke began to protest, but Octavia cut her off. “Heda will still be probably-dead in the morning,” she snapped. “And we’re going to be definitely-dead if we can’t see where we’re going.”

Clarke unfurled her bedroll beside the small fire Octavia kindled, which she had to resist the instinct to stomp out. It had been so long since she had traveled without being chased that it was hard to remember no one was looking for her anymore. Now, the only thing after her was the clock. The one that ticked away Lexa’s life—if she was even still alive at all—and the one that counted down to the end of the world.

She sat watching the flames with her knees pulled to her chest, too wired to lie down. “What if there are other hideouts Indra doesn’t know about? Secret ones, just for the commander.”
Octavia dropped onto her own bedroll, her back to the fire. “If you’re not going to sleep, you take watch.”

“Octavia.”

She turned to face Clarke, eyes dull. “Then Nyko couldn’t have known about them either.”

Clarke bit her lip and nodded, her worry subdued for a moment. “But what if there’s somewhere that —?”

“Clarke, if you want to make a plan, fine. Start talking. But if you want to complain about how there are too many places where you might find your dead alpha alive, then please, for the love of god, shut up.”

Clarke closed her mouth, swallowing guiltily. She didn’t miss the pain in Octavia’s angry eyes as she shut them, or the way her hand curled up and around the side of her neck, where Lincoln’s mating bite was. Clarke’s own unmarked pulse point throbbed with longing, and with jealousy she knew she had no right to feel.

Like all mating bites shared between alphas and omegas, the one on Octavia’s throat had fundamentally altered her physiology—a reality that Clarke’s mother had warned her about every time she’d so much as glanced in an alpha’s direction. Lincoln’s saliva introduced to the glands in Octavia’s neck had changed her scent, had made the smell of other alphas repugnant to her, and had created a bone-deep yearning that only he would be able to satisfy. A mated omega would long for her alpha not only during heat, but in any time of intense need. The more weeks and months that passed without contact, the more intense that longing—and its physical side effects—would become.

For now, so soon after Lincoln’s death, Clarke guessed that any pain Octavia felt would be centered around the mating scar itself. It was still a new mark, and new marks ached to be bitten again—for the mating to be reaffirmed—almost as much as old, neglected ones did. For an omega whose alpha had died, Clarke imagined that ache must feel like a tangible manifestation of the pain in her heart—excruciating, but something to hold on to.

Instinctively, her fingers brushed over the pocket of her coat that held the Flame.

“I’ll take first watch,” she murmured. “Night, O.”

Clarke slipped her gun out of the back of the waistband of her pants, where she’d taken to keeping it these last two weeks. It wasn’t the same weapon that had stolen Lexa’s life, but Clarke still couldn’t feel its cold weight in her hand without picturing Titus’s bony fingers in place of her own. Seeing it strapped against her thigh every time she glanced down was just too painful. Even now, there was a slight tremor in her grip as she set the gun down beside her.

She kept the fire alive all night to study the maps, and to think and think. It was nearly dawn before she woke Octavia to change watch. Even then she slept fitfully, Lexa’s gear clenched in her fist.

When she blinked awake under the early morning sun, the edges of her ears like ice, words were already on the tip of her tongue. “About that plan,” she rasped, pushing up onto one elbow.

“Good morning to you, too,” Octavia said. She sat on a rock at the edge of the small clearing she’d chosen for their camp, twisting her hair into braids that she just couldn’t seem to get straight. Though she must have slept three times as long as Clarke had, dark, deep circles ringed her eyes.

“How far could Nyko really have gotten with a cart?” Clarke said, continuing the conversation she’d been having with herself all night.
“Before the horses gave out or before Heda did?”

Clarke couldn’t help but flinch.

“Sorry,” Octavia muttered.

For a long time, the only sounds in the clearing were the trickle of the nearby brook and the rustle of birds overhead, blissfully unaware of the strife down below.

“We both watched them get shot, you know,” Clarke finally said, her voice soft. “I know he was your mate, but... for whatever it’s worth, I get it.”

After several more moments of quiet, Clarke pushed onto her knees and began to fold up her bedroll. Just when she was sure that Octavia wasn’t going to answer—that the other omega must be fuming over Clarke’s presumption to understand a mating bond—a small, broken voice came from the other side of the clearing.

“I want to hope she’s alive.”

Clarke’s head snapped up to find Octavia hunched over on the rock, hugging her middle. Her eyes were unguarded for the first time in days.

“For you, I do.”

Clarke nodded slowly. She offered a small, sad smile. “You just can’t.”

She knew it wasn’t personal. Octavia could no more control her bitterness about Clarke’s second chance than Clarke could check her foolish envy of Octavia’s mating mark. In truth, she was just grateful for this brief glimpse beneath Octavia’s hardened exterior and into the friend she’d once known.

Still, Clarke felt lonesome as she climbed into her saddle that morning. Octavia was there at her side, but she was making this journey alone.

“You were right about Lexa giving out,” she said as they rode on toward the coast. At first she had only felt the sting of Octavia’s words, but the more she turned them over in her mind, the more she grasped their logic. “Indra thought Nyko would have ridden as far as his horses could stand, but I’m not so sure. No matter what the horses were capable of, he couldn’t have gone very far and still kept Lexa alive. If we stick to the Xs within a day’s ride of Polis, that’s only fifty-seven more.”

Octavia only grunted.

“We can also rule out anywhere a cart couldn’t get to,” Clarke continued. “Indra said she left off all the hunting platforms that are up in trees. But rocky slopes, narrow passes, anywhere really sandy—those wouldn’t work either.”

Octavia shrugged. “Unless he got down and carried her.”

Clarke sighed. That was the problem when it came to searching for somebody who could be anywhere: there was no end to the unlesses that could unravel any plan she cobbled together. Lexa had to be in a spot Nyko had known about—unless she had woken up long enough to tell him where else to go. Lexa couldn’t be further from Polis than a day’s ride—unless Nyko had moved her more than once. Lexa had to be in one of Indra’s hideaways—unless she was somewhere else entirely.

Then there was the biggest, scariest unless of them all: Lexa had to be alive—unless she wasn’t.
Clarke gripped her reins tighter. She had no choice but to push the doubts from her mind. She wanted to look for the commander under every godforsaken rock in the forest, but there was no time for that. At each turn she had to decide what was most likely, then screw the rest.

By nightfall, she and Octavia had traversed most of the land between Polis and the ocean. They had visited all of Indra’s Xs they encountered, save one that showed signs of recent inhabitation by Pauna. Clarke had searched each hideout from top to bottom for any sign that Lexa had been there in the last two weeks, and each had been as crushingly empty as the last.

Of course, if Clarke were to find traces of Lexa but not Lexa herself, it would beg the questions she had been trying not to dwell on: if the commander had been taken to one of Indra’s hideouts but wasn’t there any longer, then where was she? And what had she been doing all this time?

They were questions with no good answers. If Lexa was in the same place Nyko had taken her to heal, it would mean her condition was still grave. And if she wasn’t… then either she didn’t want to be found, or she was already dead.

That night, Clarke and Octavia camped close to the cove where they had once called upon the Boat People with Lincoln’s smoke signals. The wind blew in frigid from the water, but a tall sand dune protected them from the worst of its sting.

“Nyko couldn’t have gone to Luna, right?” Clarke asked, staring into the damp, spitting fire.

She had built it this time, for Octavia had seemed unable to do much but slump onto her bedroll after they had finished watering the horses. Even when Clarke had cut into a seedy fruit and held out half to the other omega, Octavia had just shaken her head.

“Luna would have said something,” Clarke went on. “She would have told us Lexa was there.” She had been going over and over it in her mind, because it was better than tallying the day’s many failures. “Right?”

“I guess,” Octavia said, her voice rough with exhaustion. She lay on her side, facing Clarke and the fire, but her gaze seemed far away.

“I would have smelled her,” Clarke insisted, more to herself than to Octavia. She wound a blade of beach grass around one finger, then another. “I would have known.”

Right?

The next day, Clarke’s conviction had them angling away from the coast—and Luna—and heading southwest.

Clarke searched for the commander with the same pulse-quickening anxiety as the day before, and she found just as little. The more miles they logged, the more hopeless she felt.

This time when Octavia collapsed beside their nighttime fire, Clarke did too. She told herself it was only because her muscles were sore from riding. Because her energy was low from finishing the last of their rations that morning. Because the wet spring air had shivered away what was left of her endurance. Deep down, she wondered if it was more.
A sign that all of this was a waste of time.

“Did you mean what you said?” Clarke whispered across the fire. “At the stables?”

Octavia’s eyes fluttered open. The rings below them were even darker than they’d been the day before. “Huh?”

“That this is a fantasy.”

“Oh.” Octavia stared at her through the flames. The fire’s flickering reflection was the only thing that made the omega’s haunted eyes look alive. “Yeah.”

Clarke nodded against her makeshift pillow. She closed her eyes so Octavia wouldn’t catch the tears in them.

“But it’s the ground, Clarke. Weirder things have happened.”

Clarke’s chest clenched with gratitude. Thank you, she wanted to say to Octavia’s peace offering. But her breath caught, and something else came out instead—a fear that had been festering ever since she’d first clambered onto the gray gelding the stable girl had lent her.

“What if Indra sent us out here just to get us out of the way? What if she doesn’t really believe Lexa could have lived?”

What if every clue Clarke had found was just another cruel coincidence, and everybody knew it but her?

Octavia snorted, and Clarke cracked open her eyes. “If Indra thought you were being an idiot, she would’ve told you to your face.”

Despite herself, one corner of Clarke’s mouth twitched up. Octavia had a point.

With a shaky exhale, she flopped over onto her back. She knew she had to get her feelings under control. Her wallowing hadn’t helped Lexa back in Polis when she’d failed to force her way out of the commander’s chambers to chase down Titus, and it wouldn’t help Lexa now. Lexa had been strong for both of them more times than Clarke could count, and now it was her turn.

“It’s just… Luna.”

They had turned away from the ocean miles back, but the beta Nightblood and her floating clan of pacifists wouldn’t stop nagging at Clarke.

“Nyko knew Luna,” she said, staring into the dark treetops up above. “He would have known she might take them in.”

And yet, the more she turned it over in her mind, the less Clarke could believe her own fledgling theory.

Luna might have shared a connection with Lexa when they were young, but she had made it abundantly clear that no one who brought danger to her clan would be welcome on the oil rig. And who would attract more danger than the exiled commander of the blood?

And even if Luna had made an exception for an old friend, Lexa was an alpha as much as she was the commander. When Clarke thought of Lexa’s booming voice that day she stopped Quint from killing her in the woods, or of how she had cried out when she wasn’t sure if Clarke had survived the
bombing in Tondc, she knew that Lexa wouldn’t—\textit{couldn’t}—have watched her come aboard without making her presence known. Her protective instincts wouldn’t have allowed it, not when Clarke’s own scent had been so plainly calling out in pain and fear.

If Lexa had been incapable of speaking for herself—because she was unconscious and recovering, Clarke told herself, not because she was already gone—then Luna would have been the one to spill. The beta knew Lexa well enough to know that the commander would have wanted to return to land and save her people from the City of Light, even if it meant putting her own life in danger. Besides, handing over a Nightblood—any Nightblood—would have been the fastest way to get Clarke out of her hair.

The final blow came in the form of Clarke’s own nose. In the days following Lexa’s death, the faintest whiff of the alpha she had lost would have been enough to knock her to her knees. She had been all over that old rig, and she had smelled nothing but salt and strangers.

Strangers who would have seen what Nyko carried on his cart… but strangers who could have helped him, too.

All of a sudden, Clarke sat up. The fur flopped down at her waist as her thoughts took shape.

The \textit{oil rig} was full of strangers, but not everywhere was.

It wasn’t Luna that had been nagging at her all these hours. It was what Luna represented.

An \textit{ally}.

The night air bit at Clarke’s exposed neck, but her pulse beat hot in her fingertips. “When Nyko’s people were sick, he brought them to Arkadia. When he was attacked by the Ice Nation, he went to my mom. After the Mountain, he wanted to work together with the other clans to use the medical resources there. Octavia, Nyko gets help.”

In the last two days, Clarke had pictured Nyko closing Lexa’s bullet hole thousands of times, and she had imagined finding Lexa alive in her every waking moment.

But what about everything in between?

How had Nyko held pressure to the commander’s wound around the clock when he must have been ready to succumb to exhaustion before he even reached his destination—whatever it had been? How had he found the supplies he needed and watched over his critical patient at the same time? How had he gathered enough for both of them to eat? How had he kept curious passersby or wild animals at bay?

All at once, the answer was obvious.

“He couldn’t have done it alone,” Clarke whispered. And even if he could have, he \textit{wouldn’t} have. That wasn’t who Nyko was. “O, we’ve been looking in the wrong places.”

Octavia’s only reply was a sluggish, half-asleep grunt.

Undeterred, Clarke dug the defaced first aid manual out of her bag and crowded close to the fire, her fur forgotten. On her maps of the hideouts, Indra had penciled in Trikru villages—and some of the other nearby clans’, too—to serve as landmarks. Up until tonight, Clarke had given the villages little thought. All she’d needed to know about them was to stay away.

Now, her heart beat fast as she studied Indra’s little flame-lit squares. She knew they were there to
show her where not to go. To show her where she was bound to attract unwanted attention, and where the commander couldn’t possibly be—or so Indra thought.

But the Trikru general hadn’t been there with Nyko. She wasn’t here now.

And unfortunately for Indra, Clarke had never been very good at following the rules.

It was the third time she had repeated Clarke’s words, and each repetition had sounded more skeptical than the last. She looked pale under the early morning sun, slumped forward on her bedroll with her elbows on her knees.

“It’s where Nyko is from,” Clarke said, kneeling beside her own bedroll to pack up their meager camp. She had already explained to Octavia everything she’d realized the night before—about how Nyko would have had to find help if he wanted to keep Lexa alive for longer than a few hours. The other omega seemed to be struggling to keep up. “If he needed help, he would have brought her to someone he’s close to. Someone he can trust. Tondc is our best chance of finding whoever that is.”

“Yeah,” Octavia muttered. “If Finn didn’t kill them already.”

Clarke’s hand stilled over her small pack. “Are you okay, O?”

Octavia grunted absently.

“You said that already.” Clarke pressed down the painful memories. “About Finn.”

She had initially interpreted Octavia’s repeated questions as doubt about their new plan. Now she was starting to worry it was something more.

“How about some food?” she offered. “We’re out of what we brought, but I can go hunt for something.” She hoped Octavia wouldn’t hear the reluctance in her voice. The last thing she wanted to do was traipse through the forest after rabbits. She had something much more precious to find, and her own empty stomach could wait.

Not only did Octavia not roll her eyes at Clarke’s obvious impatience to set out, she also didn’t snort at the mention of Wanheda’s hunting prowess—which was reason enough to worry about her. “I’m not hungry,” Octavia said flatly.

That was hard to believe, considering neither of them had eaten since breakfast the day before. “Are
you sure? There might be some—"

Before Clarke could finish, Octavia lurched forward onto her hands and knees and scrambled a few feet away from last night’s fire, where she vomited water and stomach acid into the grass.

Clarke’s mouth fell open. Her eyes widened with a sudden, heartbreaking realization.

“Octavia…”

“I’m not pregnant,” Octavia snapped, her head hanging. “So stop fucking looking at me like that.”

Clarke averted her eyes as she crawled to kneel beside her friend, a water skin in hand. “Here,” she said gently, resting her other hand on Octavia’s lower back. She let soothing pheromones ripple through the air, and Octavia’s tense muscles relaxed a fraction.

Despite their small numbers and low status on the Ark, omegas had persisted thanks to the hyper-fertility their kind would one day provide to the settlers who returned to the ground. Unlike beta women, who might—or might not—have a single birth every couple of years, omegas were practically guaranteed to conceive multiple pups every time they shared a heat with someone—and occasionally when they weren’t in heat, too. When that someone was an alpha, like Lincoln, the odds only increased.

Two beta parents could theoretically produce an omega, but omegas were more likely to come from beta-omega and alpha-omega unions. Clarke had once asked her father whether that slight genetic advantage was the only reason omegas weren’t floated the day they presented, and Jake’s sad, halting denial had been answer enough. The Ark had to make sure it didn’t lose its best breeding stock by the time the last generation landed on Earth.

Only now its best breeding stock was on Earth. And without boosters to maintain them, the contraceptive implants that had prevented pregnancies on the Ark grew less effective every day.

But if Octavia’s fierce denial hadn’t been enough to make Clarke doubt her assumption, being close enough to smell her was. Octavia didn’t smell like a warm, happy hearth, the way Clarke’s health readers had told her a pregnant, off-suppressant omega was supposed to. She smelled sharp and sick, like longing edged with sweat.

“I’m fine,” Octavia said, shaking off the hand on her back. She stood up and spat at the ground. “Let’s go.”

Clarke watched with worried eyes as Octavia tied up her belongings and secured them to her saddle, then hauled herself up onto her horse. Any other day, she would have insisted they stop and hunt. Any other day, she would have demanded to know what was really wrong.

Today, she pressed down her worry. Today, she stood up and brushed herself off.

Today, Lexa was waiting.

Halfway to Tondc, Clarke’s concern had risen right back up again. Despite the chill midday air, Octavia’s already sallow skin had taken on a damp gleam as they rode. She seemed weaker than usual—which even now was probably stronger than five average Sky People combined, but still.
Clarke gnawed on her lip. She knew there were a hundred reasons why Octavia could feel unwell, but she could only seem to dwell on one. The worst one.

It wasn’t possible that anyone could already be showing symptoms of radiation sickness, was it? They would have seen other signs of the nuclear meltdown first, right? Clarke would be feeling the effects too, wouldn’t she? It had been less than a week since she was in the City of Light, and A.L.I.E. had said they had six months.

As they set off up a muddy hill, Clarke pressed her heels harder into her horse’s sides. She had to get to Tondc, Lexa or no Lexa. She had to see for herself that people weren’t already getting sick.

That she wasn’t already too late.

When they reached the top of the hill and Octavia used her sleeve to wipe her dripping brow, understanding hit Clarke square in the gut. She wanted to slap her own forehead.

Of course.

“You’re going into heat,” she burst out, overcome with relief.

Octavia did not seem to share the opinion that this was good news. “I’m not,” she growled, but it sounded like a plea. “It’s never felt like this before.”

In addition to the contraceptives implanted in the arms of anyone who could potentially conceive a child, omegas on the Ark were given heat suppressants, too. It was for their own comfort and protection, the Council said, lest their heats—or even their everyday scents, which the suppressants also diluted—drive alphas to mindless violence. Mate bonding was also more likely to occur during heats than it was outside them, and a mating bond was an unbreakable commitment with lifelong repercussions.

Octavia, who hadn’t officially existed until she was sixteen, hadn’t received suppressant shots until she was discovered and sent to the Sky Box. She had struggled through her first several heats under the floor of the Blakes’ quarters. Clarke was sure it had been torture, confined and shut in like that, but the experience meant Octavia had an advantage now. Unlike the few other omega delinquents, she knew what heats felt like and had practice managing their effects without drugs.

Management was a relative concept, of course, when it came to estrus. The physical need to be bred was acute—Clarke had understood that much as a preteen, after a few awkward talks from her mom—and the psychological yearning for an alpha who could do the job was just as intense. Unmated omegas might choose to lie with anybody during their heats, but a mated omega like Octavia would long only for her own alpha. Other alphas would find her mated scent unappealing, and she was likely to find them abhorrent in turn—probably for the rest of her life, but especially now, so soon after both her mating and her mate’s death.

Clarke had little experience with heats, mated or otherwise. She had been through exactly two: her first, which had been quickly curtailed by harsh hormone injections, and the one that had ended in Niylah’s bed.

It had been three weeks since the Mountain when it hit. She hadn’t noticed the hunger and exhaustion that she’d been taught would precede a heat, for she was hungry and exhausted all the time during her days in the woods. When the flush and sweat set in, she’d welcomed the thought that she had contracted some infectious fever that would soon end her fight.

It was only when images of Lexa began to creep into her thoughts—Lexa naked, Lexa throwing her
down, Lexa pushing open her thighs—that she realized what was happening. Up to that point, she’d managed to avoid thinking of the commander with anything other than boiling, seething hatred. In heat, though, her mind was no longer entirely her own. It had echoed the desperate need in her body, not the anguish in her heart.

She had curled up in a cave for four endless, pain-hazed days, half-petrified that a stranger alpha would respond to her body’s call. She’d been told that the scent of any unmated omega was difficult for an alpha to withstand, and resisting an unmated omega in heat was unthinkable. A few months on the ground had taught her that wasn’t entirely true—that alphas were capable of self-control if it was expected of them, as was the case across all Trikru territory. But some were better at restraining themselves than others, and there was no guarantee it would be a Trikru alpha who found her.

Between the weakness in her muscles and the violent impulse to submit, physical resistance would have been impossible. The best Clarke could have hoped for was that she managed to force out the word No, and that the alpha listened. And that had been the biggest problem of all—the chances of her saying no were slim. Because there was a part of her, larger and larger as the days passed, that wasn’t frightened at all. A part of her that prayed desperately for an alpha—any alpha—to sweep into the cave, slam her against the damp wall, and fuck her until she screamed.

Even as the thought had made bile rise in her throat, that part of her had wanted it. Craved it. Ached for it from the pit of her stomach down into the clutching, fluttering muscles between her legs. She had thought of Lexa, yes, but she had also pictured kneeling before Bellamy, before Nathan Miller, before Ryder, Harper, Lincoln, Atom. Before every alpha she had ever met or could ever imagine. She pictured all of them there together, sometimes fucking her in turns, sometimes tearing each other apart for the right to claim her and knot her and fill her womb with their pups.

On the Ark, Clarke had considered knotting uncomfortable at best, and repulsive at worse. It certainly wasn’t something she’d ever planned to experience herself. But in her heat-induced fog, it was all she wanted. Her own fingers proved useless. If anything, they made the empty ache in her core worse. Still she touched herself over and over again, the commander’s name on her cracked lips.

When someone finally did show up at the entrance to her cave, it wasn’t Lexa. It wasn’t even an alpha. It was Niylah, an omega with worried eyes and a kind smile who had heard Clarke’s cries while foraging in the woods.

“You’re lucky the rain hid your scent,” Niylah had said. She helped Clarke stumble through a downpour she hadn’t noticed, then into the back door of her father’s trading post. There she got a better look at Clarke’s aching, trembling form. “Or unlucky.”

With a presence of mind she wouldn’t have had a chance of mustering around an alpha, Clarke accepted Niylah’s gracious offer to help her through the rest of her heat. She slept with the trader girl that day, and although it didn’t stop her desperation to be knotted, the comforting scent and touch of another omega had eased the pain in the remaining hours. Even though Clarke had felt nothing for her beyond warm gratitude for a human connection she didn’t think she deserved, she had still blissfully decided that heat sex was hands-down, flat-out the best she would ever have.

Weeks later in the Polis tower, she learned how wrong she’d been. Niylah’s touch, though skilled, had paled in comparison to the intoxicating force that was Lexa. To the open-hearted vulnerability in the alpha’s wide eyes, and the softness of her skin as she let Clarke push her back against the furs. To the way they had come apart together, again and again and again.

“All you in heat?” Octavia asked, eyebrow raised.

Clarke cleared her throat. She was suddenly aware of the hot flush that had spread up her chest and
into her cheeks—and of the arousal that Octavia could surely smell, which only made her blush deepen. “No,” she mumbled, letting her horse stray a few feet further from Octavia’s, toward the way the wind was blowing.

As they rode on, Clarke’s embarrassment was drowned out by the familiar pain that swiftly followed every memory of Lexa—even the happy ones. Especially the happy ones.

When it came right down to it, that day in the tower was all it was. All she had gotten, and all she would ever have.

*Unless.*

“There,” Clarke breathed, shielding her eyes from the sunless, white-clouded sky.

There down another slope, past a grove of mutated fir trees, stood Tondc.

With a squeeze of her heels, Clarke set off down the hill at a canter she hardly had the skill to execute. She was lucky to arrive at the center of the rebuilt village in one piece, a breathless Octavia close behind. She eased her horse to a walk, then a stop, but her heart never slowed its pounding.

The villagers who were out and about paused in their daily tasks to watch the visitors with wary eyes. Hooves didn’t often come stomping into Tondc unannounced, Clarke guessed, and when they did they probably rarely brought good news.

Besides, she and Octavia weren’t just any travelers. They were Skaikru, or used to be.

A few worried shouts—mostly variations of *Who is that?*—were exchanged between Grounders digging out what appeared to be a rough aqueduct. A handful of people sowing early spring crops in a field beyond the village proper straightened up and peeked over, hands flattened over their brows like the brims of hats. Six or seven of the nearest villagers stopped what they were doing and gathered closer to scowl at the newcomers. They held shovels and hoes like warriors held their swords.

“I’m looking for Nyko,” she announced, before she’d even finished tumbling down from her saddle.

Octavia was not yet so weak—from heat or whatever it was—that she lacked the energy to shoot Clarke an exasperated look. She nodded respectfully at the gathered villagers as she slid down from her own horse. “*Hei. Ai laik Okteivia kom Trikru.*” She gestured to Clarke. “*Em laik Fleimkepa.*”

“Trikru!” one woman scoffed. Octavia flinched.

A second villager looked Octavia up and down, then leaned in to whisper to the first. “*Em laik Linkon houmon,*” he said.

“*Nou.*” Despite the woman’s disbelief, the news that the girl before them was Lincoln’s mate seemed to shift the mood of the group away from suspicion and closer to pity. After all, this wasn’t only Nyko’s village—it was Lincoln’s, too.

“*Sha,*” the second villager insisted.

“*Nou, em—*”

“*Em pleni!*” A man pushed his way through the group, his hand raised to silence the growing mutterings. He was an alpha warrior with roped scars crossing his brawny arms—and a mated one, judging by the way his powerful scent only half-burned Clarke’s nose, and the moon-shaped scar on
his neck.

It was a sight that would never cease to amaze her: an alpha who had not only laid claim to his chosen partner, but had allowed himself to be claimed in return.

On the Ark, where physical instincts were subject to strict Council control, the emphasis was on marriage, not mating. For couples like Clarke’s parents who did decide to mate, alphas were the ones who gave the bites, and omegas were the ones who showed their throats to receive them. Betas didn’t usually feel the urge to stake permanent physical claims on their spouses, and even if they did, the chemicals in their bites wouldn’t bind partners to them in the same way an alpha or omega’s would. Likewise, an alpha or omega’s saliva in a beta’s bloodstream would have only a fleeting effect.

For an alpha and omega who mated, on the other hand, a penetrating bite to just the right spot would connect the recipient to the biter for life. In Clarke’s experience, alphas on the Ark didn’t much like to be bound by anything, whether it was teeth-shaped scars or basic tenets of human decency. Even in her parents’ marriage, which had been an egalitarian love match by Ark standards, only her omega father had borne the physical burden of his and Abby’s union.

From the way the other villagers parted for him, the mated alpha had succeeded Indra as Tondc’s new leader. The man’s left hand had been clenched around the sword strapped to his belt, but his grip loosened when he reached the front of the crowd and caught sight of Clarke.

“Wanheda,” he said, his expression changing from worry to wonder.

The name didn’t sting the way it usually did, for Clarke hardly heard it. Once she had decided none of the villagers here looked sick, her eyes had started to flick from one to the next. Was that Nyko’s frown in that little girl’s face? Were those his shoulders? Did that old man have his chin, his hair, his gait, his nose?

“I am Levit kom Trikru,” the alpha went on. “It is an honor, Wanheda.”

Clarke blinked at him once, but she couldn’t make her gaze stay still. What if it wasn’t only Nyko’s family she might find in the village? If Nyko himself was still here—if he was here right this second—then…

“I need to find—“

Octavia’s elbow dug into Clarke’s ribs. “Chief,” she greeted respectfully. “Is there somewhere we can talk?”

The twinging pain in her side jolted Clarke a little closer to reason. She bit back the jumbled questions that threatened to burst forth. If Nyko was here—if he’d managed to stay hidden with Lexa for nearly three long weeks—it wasn’t because foolhardy Sky People had galloped into the village asking questions about the commander. “Yeah,” she agreed, forcing a tight smile. “Do you have a minute?”

The chief inclined his head. “Of course. Is this about Polis?” The other villagers murmured to one another in worried Trigedasleng.

Clarke’s stomach turned. “What happened in Polis?” Images of civil war flashed through her mind. Of former allies with knives at each other’s throats and the streets running with fresh blood. Of her mother caught in the middle, soon followed by everyone she knew.

“We heard of the melon-jaka,” Levit said.

Clarke let out a breath of relief. The alpha was worried about past disasters in Polis, not new ones.

“The people who forgot their own pain but rained it upon others,” he went on. “A rider who escaped from the capital passed through several days ago. He told stories of old omegas who starved but could end the fight of five warriors. Parents who sacrificed their children with a smile.”

Clarke nodded, pained by the familiar images of A.L.I.E.’s victims. “It was Old Earth tek that was controlling those people, but Skaikru stopped it. It’s over.” Any other day, she would have come up with a more nuanced explanation that the Grounders could actually understand—and one that might improve Trikru’s shattered opinion of her people, even if only by a fraction. As it was, it took all of Clarke’s self-control to stay put before the chief instead of rushing to pound on the side of every hut in sight.

The crowd of villagers, now grown, seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief. Two people hurried off straight away, perhaps to seek family or friends in Polis now that they’d gotten word the city was safe again. Clarke didn’t have the heart to tell them that she wouldn’t go quite as far as safe. If her own journey was any indication, her warnings wouldn’t make a difference. They would go after their loved ones anyway, to hell with what they might find.

“I am glad to hear it,” Levit said. “Let us talk.”

He gestured for a young beta to take the reins of Clarke and Octavia’s horses, then led them toward the spot where Clarke and Lexa had once decided to let a bomb fall on the town. A new building stood there now—one made of salvaged corrugated metal, like most of the village’s structures, and draped with a Trikru banner.

“Indra told me you replaced her,” Octavia said as they stepped inside.

Levit dipped his chin. “Another honor.”

The inside of the building was dim, and the floor swept clean. In the center sat a wide new war table, covered in neatly stacked maps and tall, never-burned candles. No wars had been waged here yet, and Clarke prayed none would be any time soon.

The new chief didn’t seem to share his predecessor’s rigidity, for he offered them rough wooden chairs at a smaller table at the side of the room, then sank down into one himself. He cast a concerned look in Octavia’s direction. “Are you well, child?”

Octavia nodded, folding her arms across her chest as she slumped into her seat. Now that she had saved Clarke from her rashness, she seemed content to retreat into her misery once more.

Clarke alone remained standing.

The chief peered up at her with curious eyes. “Your friend suggests you command not just death, but the Flame, too,” he said. “Have you come for the Natblida? Surely you know your scouts already searched the village. We have none.”

“No. No, I—I—” Clarke licked her lips. “I’m looking for Nyko, the healer. It’s really important that I find him. He’s a friend.”

Levit frowned. “I have not seen Nyko in two moons or more.”

Clarke sucked in a sharp breath. That doesn’t mean anything, she told herself. If Nyko was hiding
out with someone he trusted, the rest of Tondc might not know it. Not if he was hiding well. “Are any of his family members here? His parents, maybe? Anyone who might know where he is?”

If the chief wondered why a friend of Nyko’s didn’t already know the answers to those questions, he didn’t let it show. Instead, a dark look passed over his prominent features. “His father was taken years ago by the Maunon. His sire by your fayagon, protecting your people.”

Clarke swallowed down her guilt at the mention of Pike’s massacre. It wouldn’t help Nyko’s parents now, and it definitely wouldn’t help Lexa. “Is there anyone else? Anyone he’s close to?”

Levit thought for a moment, leaning back in his chair. “His sire’s sister lives at the western edge of the village, but she is unwell. She—”

“Thank you,” Clarke rushed to say. Already she was envisioning the fastest path she could cut through the uneven rows of huts. “I have to— Thank you.”

She slipped through the door that had barely closed behind her, ignoring the startled protest from Levit and Octavia’s deep sigh. Some of the villagers were still huddled outside, whispering, but they let her pass with nothing more than narrowed glances.

Clarke didn’t have any trouble finding the right hut. Tondc had never been large, and the population had dwindled even further after the Mountain’s bomb and the Sky People’s massacre. Though there were several dwellings on the village’s western side, only two could be said to stand on its very edge. Of those two, only one had an aging woman sat upon its makeshift front stoop, braiding blades of grass and humming to herself.

The hut reminded Clarke of Niylah’s trading post, only smaller, and littered with flotsam instead of goods for sale. Tattered fishing nets and feathers hung from nearby bushes like garland, and dozens of chains of plaited grass dangled from a small tree. Clarke’s father had once told her of the Old Earth superstition called dreamcatchers, and these rings of grass weren’t too different from what she’d pictured.

Clarke stepped closer, careful not to disturb the many odds and ends. Nyko’s aunt didn’t seem to notice her. “Hei,” she said quietly, so as not to startle the old woman lost in her art. “I’m looking for Nyko.”

The woman’s head snapped up, and Clarke got the feeling she’d known she had a visitor the whole time—she just hadn’t cared until now. “Nyko?” the woman repeated, a smile slowly spreading across her face.

Clarke found herself smiling back, her heart in her throat. Could this be it? Could this be the moment? Her eyes, now prickling at the corners, were trained on the squat, dilapidated structure behind the woman. Could Nyko be in there? Could—?

Excited, the woman stood on shaky knees and ambled close. “Yu don sin Naikou in?” she said, gripping Clarke’s hands like they were her salvation.

Clarke’s eager heart plummeted from her throat down into her stomach, and then seemed to keep on falling. Her mouth opened uselessly, suddenly bone dry. “No, I haven’t seen him,” she finally managed to answer. “I was hoping you had.”

The woman’s smile faltered. Her brow furrowed with incomprehension. “Yu don sin em in?” she repeated. “Naikou?”

“No. I haven’t. I—” Clarke shook her head, her eyes stinging for an entirely different reason.
With someone else, she might have prayed this was all part of Nyko’s deception. She might have forced her way past the woman and into the hut, just to be sure. But there was no mistaking the worry and pain in Nyko’s aunt’s voice. She couldn’t possibly know where the healer was if she longed to find him as badly as Clarke did.

“Naikou?” his aunt said again, pleading now. When Clarke didn’t answer, she began to wail, curling her thin, knobby fingers against the sides of her face. “Naikou. Naikou-ou-ou.”

“I—I’m sorry,” Clarke choked out, edging backwards. “Moba.”

At the edge of the woman’s cluttered lawn, Clarke turned to the trees. She stumbled between the two huts at the village edge, then into the woods beyond. She ran as far as her legs could carry her, hardly able to make out the forest through her tears. When her lungs burned too hot to carry on, she caught herself against a wide trunk. With a broken sob, she slid down the tree and into the damp moss below.

She had been so sure about Tondc, and she’d been wrong. She’d been wrong about finding Nyko, and about Indra’s hideouts, and about everywhere, everywhere, everywhere she’d looked.

She pressed her face into the trunk and relished how the bark bit at her skin.

Deep in her soul, she knew.

She was going to be wrong about Lexa, too.

By the time Octavia found her there in the forest, the tension in Clarke’s shoulders had fallen away. Her sobs had quieted, for her muscles didn’t have the energy to contract any longer. Her tears were dried because there were none left to fall. She felt as used up as Octavia looked, her wan skin tight around her eyes as she tried to heave Clarke to her feet.

“Come on,” Octavia said, puffing with the effort. “Stand up. We’re not done yet.”

“Yes, we are,” said Clarke, hoarse and despondent. She sank back to the ground, and this time Octavia didn’t try to help her up.

“Fine. Whatever. You hardly even made it out of the village, so lie there and rot for all I care.”

Clarke did. She stared out into the forest for what felt like days, until she couldn’t keep her eyes from falling shut. When she opened them again, the sky was dark.

Octavia was sitting on the ground against a nearby oak, the embers of an old fire casting shadows on her pale face. “Finally,” she snapped, but the relief in her voice was plain.

Clarke glanced down to see that the other omega had covered her with one of their furs sometime after she’d fallen asleep. “How long have I been out?” she rasped. “We should go. It’ll take us hours to get back to Polis.”

A second balled-up fur hit Clarke square in the side. “You are such a fucking idiot,” Octavia growled.

Clarke sat up and curled forward, her wrists hanging limply over knees. Her insides felt hollow. She
was an idiot, but not for the reasons Octavia thought. She had turned her back on actual, real problems—dire, world-ending problems—in order to chase after a ghost. “O—”

“Don’t O me, Clarke. Do you have any idea what I would give to have what you have?”

Clarke sighed, and it felt as if her very soul shuddered. “You mean false hope?”

“A chance,” Octavia corrected. “If I had even one chance…” She swallowed hard. When her voice returned, it was stronger than Clarke had heard it in days. “I would never, ever stop fighting for it.”

Clarke looked away, clenching her fists until her nails nearly broke the skin. She had already had every one of these arguments with herself, and she had still ended up here—huddled in the muddy darkness with nothing to show for the deadly risk she’d taken. How had she ever thought she would find Lexa this way? How had she ever imagined two children of the sky could set off into the woods and return with anything but woe? “What do you want me to do, Octavia? This clearly isn’t working. We need an actual tracker. If she’s even still—”

“A tracker would be useless now. The physical trail must be long gone.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“It’s supposed to make you pull your head out of your ass. You know Lexa. You. And so did Nyko. So think. Who would she trust?”

Clarke’s brows knitted together. “You think he took her to someone she knows?”

Octavia threw up her hands. “I have no idea. But I know she’s not in these fucking trees.”

“I—” Against her will, Clarke’s mind stammered over Octavia’s words. She didn’t want to think about them. She didn’t want to let herself keep hoping. “Titus,” she said anyhow, the name spilling out before she could stop herself from playing along. “Any and Gustus.”

Octavia rolled her eyes. “Preferably somebody who’s alive.”

“Indra.”

“Next,” Octavia said dismissively.

“Nyko.”

Her friend imitated the buzz of an airlock alarm.

Me, Clarke wanted to say. She trusts me. The thought made her fists unclench just a fraction. It made her shake off the last remnants of sorely needed sleep and sit up a little straighter. Lexa would have trusted Clarke to heal her, if only they hadn’t been separated. And she would have trusted Clarke to find her now.

“What about her family?” Octavia said.

“She—” Clarke faltered. “I don’t know. We never talked about them.”

Sometimes it felt like she had known Lexa a lifetime—like she’d loved her as long as she could remember. But the reality was so different. The reality was a single afternoon.

Octavia’s face softened at Clarke’s uncertainty. “Maybe it wouldn’t be her family anyway,” she offered. “A novitiate’s main ties are to the Coalition.”
And to Heda, Clarke thought. A jolt of pain shot through her as she remembered sweet, strong Aden. He had loved Heda more than anything.

“So who else?” Octavia pushed.

Clarke bit her lip as she racked her brain. “There’s no one.”

“There has to be. Someone else she cared for.”

She shook her head. “Not that I know of.”

“Come on.”

“I don’t know.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know.”

“Who?”

The name came to Clarke’s lips before reason could stop it.

“Costia.”

Chapter End Notes

Hei - hello
Ai laik Okteivia kom Trikru - I’m Octavia of the Woods Clan
Em laik Fleimkepa - she’s the flamekeeper
Em laik Linkon houmon - she’s Lincoln’s mate/spouse
Nou - no
Sha - yes
Em pleni - that’s enough
Melon-jaka - literally, head-thief(ves)
Tek - technology
Natblida - Nightblood(s)
Maunon - Mountain Men
Fayagon - gun(s)
Yu don sin Naikou/em in? - you’ve seen Nyko/him?
Moba - sorry
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Clarke nears the end of her rope. Will she find answers there?

Chapter Notes

Hi friends! Season 4 has started, but I'm not watching or reading about it, so this fic won't be tied to what's going on over there. For those watching (I'm impressed by your strength!), expect to see major differences and possibly some similarities I'm not aware of.

As always, I'd love to hear your thoughts after you read. And hands up for those going to ClexaCon! I'll be there cosplaying as Lexa.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Who’s Costia?”

The hazy moonlight outside Tondc cast shadows on Octavia’s face, and Clarke could just make out her confused frown. Now that her brain had caught up with her mouth, Clarke pinched the bridge of her nose. “Never mind,” she said quickly.

Octavia had done what she did best: thrown herself against a door over and over again until it had broken down, heedless of what she might find on the other side. Only this time what lay behind the door was useless. Octavia wanted the name of someone Lexa trusted, someone who might know where Nyko had taken her, but Clarke had run out of options—other than the nameless, faceless family members she and Lexa had never even discussed. Costia’s name on her lips was just more proof that she’d hit rock bottom.

“Your last idea was no one, so just spit it out.”

Clarke shook her head. “Costia’s not…” She licked her dry lips. “She’s…”

Octavia ran a hand through her tangled hair, still in its braids from the day before. “Griffin.”

“Lexa loved her.”

Octavia’s eyebrows shot up. “The commander’s intended mate?” Clarke nodded, and her friend’s eyes widened. “I’ve heard warriors whisper about her, but never a name. That’s…” She thought for a moment. “That could be something, actually.”

Clarke sighed. “She’s dead, O. Just like Anya and Gustus and everyone else.”

“No shit,” Octavia said, but there was no malice in her voice. Wheels were clearly turning in her mind. She pushed up onto her knees beside the tree she’d been leaning against, though it seemed to take great effort. Clarke was reminded of how long it had been since either of them had eaten. “What
about Costia’s parents, though? If anyone would know who Lexa’s family is and where they’re from—besides the bald guy, I mean—it would be the parents of the girl she was going to claim.”

Clarke didn’t know if Costia had been an omega, or if perhaps the commanding alpha was expected to mark her mate regardless of gender. But on top of everything else, on top of every failure of these last three days, the thought of Lexa sinking her teeth into someone else’s throat was more than her singed nerves could handle, even if the poor girl in question was long dead. Even if Lexa herself was.

“How do you know that?” she argued, snappish and hurting. “It’s not like Bell got cozy with Lincoln’s family.”

Octavia shrank back against the tree, and Clarke immediately regretted her harsh words. Her friend had finally been engaged in something other than grief or anger, and Clarke had shoved her right back into the pain.

It wasn’t Octavia who Clarke was upset with. It was herself—not least for her pointless jealousy of a dead, innocent girl. For her envy of the years Costia had spent with Lexa that she, Clarke, would never get to have. “I’m sorry,” she said, pressing the heels of her hands into her eyes. “I didn’t mean that.”

Octavia shot her a wounded glare. “Lincoln wanted Bellamy to get to know him before we mated. Even after all the shit my brother did. That’s how I know.” Her voice was hoarse with the unshed tears she was trying to blink away. “Trikru survived down here because of their communities. Because they rely on each other. The commander would have had to show her mate that she could be relied on. But you wanna know who you really have to impress?” She didn’t wait for Clarke’s answer. “The family.”

“Lexa was an alpha.” Clarke scoffed. “She was Heda. You seriously think she had to put on a… a… mating dance?”

“Yes.”

“O.” Clarke tilted her face up to the night sky in exasperation. She wished she hadn’t opened her mouth about Costia in the first place. All of this was pointless.

“And she wasn’t the commander at the beginning. I heard once that Heda’s intended was at the conclave, which means they got together before that.”

Clarke sighed. “So you’re proposing that we ride all across the Coalition from scratch, even though Costia could have been from any clan, and—”

“She was Trikru,” Octavia interrupted. “She must have been from a village near Polis, or she wouldn’t have been there to fall for a Nightblood.”

“—and hope her parents are alive, and hope we find them, and hope they know Lexa’s family, then hope they’re still alive, and that we can find them, and that Lexa is somehow with them, despite having no connection to her parents after she was scouted and taken to the capital?”

Octavia shrugged. “Basically.”

“Octavia.”

“Do you have something better to do?”
Yes, Clarke nearly shouted. But that would have invited questions she wasn’t ready to answer. Questions about nuclear meltdowns and radiation poisoning and the end of the joken world. Most of all, questions about how Clarke could possibly have kept those things a secret all this time.

“Give me a better idea by dawn or that’s the plan,” Octavia said, stretching out her legs and crossing them at the ankles. She looked less like she was about to go into heat than she had that afternoon, but no less pale or exhausted. “Now give me back my fur and take watch so I can get some fucking sleep. I gave up a real bed in the village to come after your sorry ass.”

Clarke chucked back the bunched-up fur that Octavia had pelted at her, but she didn’t argue. She wasn’t a good enough liar to convince Octavia that she’d rather go back to Polis and squabble with the clan ambassadors instead of stay here in the woods and search for Lexa.

As soon as she did that—as soon as she turned back to the capital, tail between her legs—she would be admitting defeat. She would be admitting that all of this had been a colossal, catastrophic waste of time.

She would be admitting Lexa was dead.

The morning sun hovered below the tips of the trees as they made their way back into Tondc, but Clarke still hadn’t bested Octavia’s plan.

She hadn’t come up with any other ideas at all, for she’d been too busy staring into the darkness and wondering whether she would be a fool to trust in Octavia, or a fool not to. Despite Octavia’s superior understanding of Grounder culture, she was grasping at straws as much as Clarke was.

It wasn’t as if Clarke wanted to give up. That wasn’t how she was built—not for anything, but especially not when it came to Lexa. Then again, the commander would have been the first to tell her: the best warriors knew when to retreat.

In a dozen more steps, Clarke was embarrassed to discover that her breakdown the night before had only carried her a couple hundred feet from Tondc’s outer edge. Half the village had probably heard her sobbing among the trees.

She swallowed her pride as they made their way to the village center, where Octavia said the chief’s beta son had tied their horses for the night. The only other person up and about was a man with one eye who nodded at them, then scraped the remains of his early morning meal into a pen full of chickens.

Octavia seemed to sense Clarke’s uncertainty. “We might as well give it a shot. It’s not like we have anything left to lose.” The words sounded more hollow than determined, as if Octavia were speaking of life in general and not just the search for the commander.

“I would have thought you’d be happy to get back to Indra,” Clarke said. She focused on each squelch of her boots on the muddy ground, as if watching them hard enough might tell her which way she should turn. Back to Polis and defeat—or onward toward the memory of Costia and the slimmest chance that it might eventually lead her to Lexa’s family, then Lexa herself.

“Yeah. Right,” Octavia said. “She’s gonna be thrilled to see me empty handed.”
All at once, Clarke understood the reason for Octavia’s newfound commitment to their cause. She touched her friend’s arm and drew her to a stop. “O, you know you’re Trikru no matter what now, right? Indra’s not going to stop training you if we don’t… If we…”

If we find out Lexa is dead.

Octavia pulled away and kept walking. “You don’t know that,” she said gruffly.

Clarke’s heart clenched. All Octavia had ever wanted was to belong—to the Ark, to Lincoln, and then to the Woods Clan. She’d already been stripped of her Trikru status once, and of Lincoln for good. “Indra won’t let you go again,” Clarke said, voice firm. “Not because of this. She knows this is a…” Wild goose chase? Fool’s errand? Her stomach clenched. “Long shot.”

Octavia shrugged. “Then let’s shoot long.”

Before Clarke could answer, a rumbling male voice greeted them. “Wanheda.”

Clarke turned to see Tondc’s new leader, the one they’d met the day before. He stepped out of a hut near the horse posts, as if he’d been waiting for them to return.

“Chief,” Octavia said, stopping several feet before Levit’s broad alpha form.

“I am glad to see you found a safe place to spend the night,” Levit said. He cocked his head. “Though I am told our fur palettes are softer than the forest floor.”

Clarke’s face flushed. “Yeah, sorry. I, um—”

“Think nothing of it, Wanheda. Many warriors prefer to sleep beneath the stars.” He offered a small smile. “But since you didn’t accept our hospitality last night, I trust you will at least let me freshen your horses for your journey back.”

Clarke shifted with discomfort at the word back. “That really isn’t nec—”

“Please, Wanheda. Some fear Skaikru, but I have not forgotten the Mountain. My mate was lost inside, and now, because of you, he is home again. New horses are the least I can do to thank you. And you, gona,” he said, nodding to Octavia, “Lincoln was a good man. Were our fates reversed, he would have ensured my mate safe travel. Please, this way.”

Levit led them to the posts they’d been headed toward, where, in typical alpha boldness, he had already replaced their worn-out horses with a pair of matching bay mares.

“I will send back your gapa as soon as they are strong again,” he said, untying one of the new horses from its post. It gave a soft huff, creating small clouds of fog around its nostrils. “I am sorry you did not find your friend. Nyko, too, is a good man. If I see him again, I will tell him you came. You are returning to Polis, yes?”

Clarke swallowed. She looked to Octavia, who only stared back at her, even and penetrating.

Clarke knew what she wanted, and what she knew was right. She thought of Lexa, and of the words she would never forget: I made this choice with my head, not my heart. She thought of all the personal misery that had come from that decision at the Mountain, and the many lives that had been spared.

It would be the same again now.
And yet Indra’s words, too, rang in Clarke’s ears. We all must know, the general had said. This was bigger than Clarke's feelings, and bigger even than Lexa’s life. This was about Heda. All of Trikru—all of the Coalition—needed to know if their commander still lived. If she did, and if she could reunite the clans, then Clarke might be able to save everyone. She might be able to stop the second nuclear apocalypse, and not only so she could watch the survivors slaughter one another in a civil war.

Clarke grit her teeth. She hadn’t given up when three hundred warriors came to the drop ship for blood, or when a two-ton steel door blocked her from her friends, or when her own mother hung by the neck from Ontari’s balcony. She wasn’t going to give up now, not even if she was tired and sad and hungry and sick of dead ends. Not even if Octavia’s plan would have them set out on a wing and a prayer.

“Not yet,” Clarke told the chief with a shaking breath. Her eyes were still locked with Octavia’s. “We have somewhere else to go first.”

Levit inclined his head, unaware of the magnitude of her decision. He set to preparing the horses for travel. “In that case, you will take rations as well. I insist.” He cast a thoughtful glance in Octavia’s direction. “You have not been eating.”

Octavia shrugged, giving the alpha a wide berth as she went to saddle one of the horses herself. “I’m on a diet.”

Levit’s brow rippled at what must have been an unfamiliar use of an already uncommon Gonasleng word. Sensing Octavia’s discomfort, Clarke cut in.

She’d had a last-ditch idea.

“Hey,” she said to the chief, trying to sound conversational—gossipy, even, like the teenager she was supposed to be. “Nyko’s aunt told me the last commander’s intended mate was from Tondc.” She pressed down the guilt she felt at using the old woman as a prop in her lie—even if it was a clumsy one, judging by the roll of Octavia’s eyes behind Levit’s shoulder. “You must have known her, huh?”

The chief turned to Clarke with a frown, his gaze shrewd. For the first time, she got a glimpse of the dominant alpha warrior he must have been before he became the warm village leader. “Not many are bold enough to speak of that girl,” he said. His words were slow and probing, as if he expected Clarke to crumble at any moment and admit that Nyko’s aunt hadn’t mentioned any such thing.

Instead, Clarke said nothing. She stood still and steady, with all the innocent curiosity she could muster. Even after all these months on the ground, she sometimes still had to remind herself that she wasn’t expected to avert her eyes every time a powerful alpha looked at her. Most omegas would, even here—it was a time-honored survival instinct to defer to those more dominant, after all—but it wasn’t compulsory among the Trikru, who valued omegas for more than just their fertility. A stare-down might be seen as disrespectful, depending on the circumstances, but Clarke knew it wasn’t going to get her shoved into a hallway wall or shunned during lunch.

Of course, it would have been a different story if she were a fellow alpha, or even a particularly dominant beta. She’d seen plenty of otherwise friendly discussions between Grounder alphas devolve into scuffles because one had looked at the other the wrong way. The double standard irked her, despite the freedom it offered her as an omega. An alpha staring back at Levit would be a challenge he had to answer, but Clarke could do it because he didn’t see her as a threat.

Then again, assumptions about an omega’s submissive, guileless nature had their advantages in
moments like this one.

With a last searching look, Levit’s stance finally relaxed. “I suppose that will change now that Heda is dead.” He shook his head with a sigh. “The poor child.”

Clarke chose to believe he meant Costia, not Lexa herself. “So you did know her.”

“Of her, only. She came from the south, not Tondc. Nyko’s aunt is often confused.”

He cinched the saddle around the belly of Clarke’s horse, and she knew he was cinching closed this topic, too. Still, she had gotten more than she’d hoped for. When Levit turned and offered his arm, she grasped it tightly.

“I hope you find what you seek, Wanheda.”

Clarke and Octavia rode south from Tondc, shielding their eyes from the still-rising sun. They had purposely avoided villages on their journey thus far, which meant that even the areas where they had searched Indra’s forest hideouts would have to be visited again. Indra had marked nine villages on her maps that were south of Tondc but still on Trikru land. Two had cropped up in the last couple of years, after Lexa brought the Ice Nation into the Coalition, which meant Costia couldn’t have been from either one. That still left seven villages for them to search, not to mention an untold number of informal settlements.

The further they rode, the more Clarke felt that south might as well have been as big a place as anywhere. She still had her doubts that Costia’s family could be found at all—and if they could, that they would have any idea where Nyko might have taken Lexa. But Octavia had been right in the woods last night. Until they came up with a better idea, this was what they had to go on. And it was hard to argue that it was any worse than a map covered in endless caves. Just in case, Clarke insisted that they stick to the forest instead of the roads, and she slid off her horse to check any of Indra’s remaining Xs that they happened to stray near.

They reached the nearest of the seven villages by midday. It stood on a cliff overlooking a long-dried lake bed, where Clarke and Octavia now stood—or maybe it was a crater from a bomb.

“You heard Levit,” Octavia whispered as they set off up a tall rope ladder that led to the village. “If the Trikru don’t say her name, then neither do we. Let me do the talking.”

Clarke did.

Octavia talked and talked with the cliffside villagers, all in Trigedasleng, of Heda’s youth, and kidnappings in the capital, and the war that brought Azgeda into the Coalition. She chatted with elders and teens, farmers and tradespeople, and Clarke did nothing but clench her fists at each offhand reference to Lexa that she could understand.

*Heda is never young. The vessel only looks it.*

*She abandoned our ways and the Spirit abandoned her.*

*Look where her Coalition got us.*
Clarke was holding Lexa’s gear again, and only the twelve prongs digging into her palm grounded her enough to stay quiet.

When Octavia strode back toward the ladder in the early afternoon, they knew as little about Costia as when they’d arrived.

Clarke hurried close behind her. “That’s it?”

Octavia threw one leg over the ladder that would take them back to their horses at the bottom of the cliff. “We have to be subtle. These people barely tolerate Skaikru as it is. If we offend them, they aren’t going to tell us anything.”

Clarke almost rolled her eyes. Subtle had never been a quality of Octavia’s among the Hundred. “Apparently they aren’t going to tell us anything either way.”

“They did tell us something.” Octavia started climbing down, and her head disappeared over the cliff’s edge. Clarke was forced to swing a leg over the ladder’s top rung and follow in order to keep listening. “They told us Heda’s intended mate wasn’t a public figure,” Octavia said into the wind. “They didn’t really know anything about her, even the ones who knew of her, like Levit. And that was hardly anybody to begin with.”

Clarke frowned. She glanced down at Octavia, but when she saw how far away the ground was, she snapped her gaze back to the raw earth in front of her nose. “How do you know that? I was there the whole time, and no one even said her name. You never even said her name.”

“Half of Trigedasleng is in tone of voice, you know.”

Clarke did roll her eyes then. “Even if you’re right, how does people not knowing her help us?”

“Because it means we can’t just go around asking random people about a random girl. We have to find someone who actually knew her. Personally.”

Stewing with frustration, Clarke rode in tight-lipped silence for the next few hours. In her mind, she practiced pronouncing all the decidedly unsubtle questions she was going to ask as soon as they reached the next town—only she never got to use them.

The second village was less than a mile off a main road to Polis, encircled by a cement wall with crumbling archways—an old sports stadium, Clarke guessed, like the ones in the soccer games she’d watched with her dad. She and Octavia rode up to the spiked gate erected inside the biggest arch, only to be chased off by villagers carrying stones amidst cries of Skaikru! Gon we! before they could even state their business.

From the Grounders’ gaunt faces and their frightened shouts, the village had shared the capital’s dark fate.

“Wan-klika,” Octavia told Clarke as they made camp that night. “That’s what they were saying.”

Death key.

By the following day, the hopelessness Clarke felt in Tondc had settled over her once more. She
hadn’t slept, hadn’t eaten, hadn’t done anything besides torment herself with the horror she had let Thelonious Jaha unleash upon the Grounders, and the ever-closing window she had left to find Lexa.

The next village had clearly suffered at A.L.I.E.’s hand, too, but it was not so well defended as the stadium. Clarke and Octavia met no resistance as they rode across its indistinct border and into a small market center.

A handful of Grounders were outside here and there, hauling pails of water or sorting sacks of foraged root vegetables, but no leader came forward like Levit had done in Tondc. Judging by the small number of people here compared to the many mud-walled huts, most of the village’s residents had yet to return from Polis, where A.L.I.E. would have lured them, or else had died there. The villagers Clarke did see peered up at her with sunken, defeated eyes, distrustful of visitors but too weary to drive them away. As she and Octavia dismounted, Clarke wondered whether she looked much better herself.

“We’re looking for someone,” she told the nearest villager, despite the elbow Octavia poked into her side.

The beta woman shrugged, uncomprehending, and hurried away into a nearby hut.

Clarke tried again in Trigedaslang. “Osir ste lufa won au,” she said to a mated omega man.

“Griffin,” Octavia said tightly.

The man was pushing a makeshift wheelbarrow along the village path. Clarke fell in step beside him, too exhausted to heed Octavia’s warning. “Kostia kom Trikru nomon o nontu,” she specified, only half-sure she had the right words for parents. “Do you know them?”

“Nou, nou,” the man said. He waved his hand to shoo her like a fly.

Clarke couldn’t tell whether that meant he didn’t know them, or didn’t know who Costia was, or couldn’t understand her at all. Dejected, she let her feet drag to a stop as the man continued on. In a few more steps, he turned his cart off the path, toward a small, lopsided hut. He was a dozen feet away now, and Clarke almost didn’t catch what he muttered under his breath.

“Kostia,” the man said, shaking his head. He ghosted his fingertips against his forehead, then pointed them toward the sky.

Clarke’s eyes widened. “Wait,” she called, jogging after the omega. The man pushed open the hut door and slipped inside. “Wait, you do know—”

“Nou.”

The door slammed shut inches from Clarke’s nose. She took a step back, breathing heavily, then knocked on the closed door. Her pulse started to quicken. “Beja,” she called, “I’m just looking for information.”

When minutes passed and there was no answer, she spun on her heel.

Octavia stood on the path, her arms crossed and her hip cocked at a defiant angle. “See?”

“Did you see?” Clarke brushed by her. “He knew something.”

“Well, good luck finding out what.”
Clarke walked on, ignoring Octavia’s jab. When she saw a trio of older betas dragging sacks of grain in from the fields, she dispensed with the few pleasantries she’d still been holding onto. “Kostia kom Trikru,” she said without preamble. “Was she from this village? Did you know her? Yo don get em in?” she translated.

Unlike the first villagers, who had hurried away without acknowledging her, the betas stared at Clarke with widening eyes—then hurried away.

Octavia trailed behind. “Clarke, stop.”

“Costia,” she said to the next person, and the next, and the one after that.

Half the villagers gave her blank stares. The other half—the warriors, usually—shook their heads like the omega man and repeated his gesture. They pressed their fingertips briefly to their foreheads, then turned them toward the sky. Their absentminded reverence reminded Clarke of the pious people in the Old Earth movies she used to watch with Wells, the ones who traced the shape of a cross in the air.

“Costia,” she said still. Costia, Costia, Costia.

One by one, the villagers disappeared into their homes. Clarke was left spinning in the village center, head craned over her shoulder for someone else to ask.

“Clarke!” Octavia grabbed her by the upper arms.

Clarke blinked at her, dizzy.

“Let’s just go, okay?” Octavia said.

Inside, Clarke crumbled. Octavia released a weak wisp of calming omega pheromones, but they hardly broke through Clarke’s haze.

“The next village is only a couple hours’ ride,” Octavia said. “We’ll try again there.”

Clarke nodded numbly, glancing around at the deserted paths. Octavia had been right. Clarke had come crashing through a hurting community, careless of how the Grounders might feel, and now she had ruined her one chance at talking to someone who’d known Costia.

She was really fucking losing it.

“Let’s go,” she agreed, her voice hoarse.

They had just untied their horses, Clarke deep in morose reflection, when a hut door scraped open behind them.

“Hei,” said an unfamiliar voice.

Clarke turned to find a young woman peeking out of a foot-wide gap in two pieces of salvaged sheet metal. “Yo ste lufa Kostia au?” she said. Then she clarified, “Kostia kom Trikru?”

Clarke nodded, but she didn’t dare let herself hope.

Wary, the woman peered between Clarke and Octavia for a long moment. Before she could seem to decide whether she wanted to talk to them, her scrutiny was interrupted by a scuffle near her feet. She struggled to keep her balance as two pairs of chubby toddler arms wiggled between her legs to reach out through the doorway.
“Pshh,” she scolded. With gentle squeezes, she nudged the curious children back inside, then slipped out of the hut. Now that she was nearer, Clarke recognized the mildly pleasant scent of beta.

“Yu yongon ste yuj,” Octavia said, offering a high Grounder compliment. She translated for Clarke’s benefit. “Strong kids.”

The woman couldn’t help but smile, glancing back at the closed door. “Sha. They will be gona, like their nontu.” Her face grew serious again as the small talk faded, but she looked less guarded than before. “You are Skaikru, yes? Someone should have told you.”

Clarke couldn’t help but take a half-step closer. “Told us what?”

The woman cast her eyes from side to side, but the paths were still empty. “Kostia kom Trikru is dead. Three summers now.”

Clarke opened her mouth to say they already knew that, but Octavia put a hand on her arm. “We’re sorry for your loss,” Octavia said.

The beta woman murmured her thanks. “Mochof.”

But was it her loss? That was what Clarke needed to know. Had this woman actually known Costia, or was she just another villager who had heard the name once or twice from warriors who’d spent time in Polis? Every second that Clarke didn’t ask sent a quake through her middle, but Octavia squeezed her arm. She stood still and solemn, so Clarke did too.

Eventually, the beta woman filled the silence. “I knew her when we were small. Not well, but a little. Her mother cared for me when my parents were at war.”

Clarke’s breath caught. This time she couldn’t keep quiet. “Your neighbor here?”

“Here, yes, until her family moved to Burou. Her mother was a craftswoman, and in Burou it is only a short day’s journey to the Polis market.”

Now Clarke was the one gripping Octavia’s arm. “Is she still alive? Costia’s mother?” She tried to keep her voice steady, with mediocre success. “Is she still in Burou? Is that a village?”

The woman shuffled backwards, and Clarke realized she had crowded into her personal space. She stepped back contritely, but not before the woman had started to look nervous.

“What do you want with her?” the beta asked, her suspicion growing.

“We don’t mean her any harm,” Clarke said quickly.

The woman shook her head as if to calm herself. “She is under Heda’s sworn protection,” she said firmly, more to soothe her own worries than to warn off Clarke and Octavia.

But then the woman’s eyes widened. Apparently, she had remembered the commander was dead—and that the dead couldn’t keep their promises.

“Sis au,” she called, suddenly alarmed. She stepped back against her hut’s metal door, glancing either way down the quiet path. “Sis au!”

Clarke held her palms up in surrender. “No, no, we don’t want to hurt her. It’s okay.”

Her words weren’t enough to halt the woman’s pleas for help. “Sis au!” She called out more Trigedaslang, and while Clarke didn’t understand every word, she was fluent enough to get the gist.
Sky People—go to—mother—danger—help.

“No, I swear—”

“Clarke, we need to go.” Octavia nodded toward two warriors who had stepped out of a hut a ways down the path, worried expressions on their faces.

Clarke swallowed. The warriors were thin and slow, probably thanks to A.L.I.E.’s chips, but the swords on their hips would be no less sharp.

“Clarke, now.”

Clarke turned from Costia’s childhood neighbor and jogged the couple of feet to where Octavia was already tossing the reins over the heads of their horses.

“Fayagon!” the beta woman cried, her confusion and worry turning to outright panic. Clarke twisted her neck and saw that the woman was pointing at the gun tucked into her pants.

Clarke knew there would be nothing she could say to calm the woman now. And how could she blame her, when she could hardly hold the thing herself? “I’m sorry about all of this,” she said breathlessly. “And thank you.”

“Clarke!” Octavia was already in her saddle.

The two warriors were close now, and they were hurrying.

With a last glance at the beta woman, Clarke scrambled belly-first onto her horse. Before she could fully right herself, the animal jolted down the village path after Octavia’s mare—and straight toward the pair of warriors.

“Hod op!” one warrior shouted.

He reached up to snatch at Clarke’s outstretched ankle as they galloped past him, but she wrangled her boot into her stirrup just in time.

She and Octavia tore into the woods at the village edge. Their sudden departure had only made them look more guilty, Clarke knew, and more shouts soon rose up from the village. Someone called for a horse, and a few moments later she heard leaves crashing in the forest far behind them.

They pressed their own horses harder, and soon their head-start proved too much for their pursuers to overcome. The sounds behind them grew distant, then faded altogether—but the thumping in Clarke’s chest never quieted.

Somehow, they had done it. They had found out Costia’s parents were still alive—one of them, at least—and where to find them.

As they rode northeast toward Burou, Clarke found it difficult to remember that finding Costia’s family was no guarantee. That even if they could tell her where Lexa’s parents lived, there would still be another journey after this one. That even if she found Lexa’s family, it wouldn’t mean Nyko had taken the commander there. That no matter how fast she rode or how hard she wished, she was still chasing Octavia’s long shot.

Inside, she told herself this was it. This was going to lead her to an answer. She had to—it had to—or she wasn’t sure she could how much longer she could keep going.
“Faster,” Octavia panted.

They had outstripped whoever had chased after them, but the woman they’d spoken to knew exactly where they were headed. Once it became clear they hadn’t been stopped, it was likely she would send a rider to warn Costia’s village, or had even set out to do it herself. Clarke and Octavia had taken the fastest path out of the village for the first few miles, but that did not happen to be the most direct route to Burou. Even with their head start, the detour made it impossible to say whether they or the scout would reach Burou first.

Many heart-pounding seconds later, Clarke saw it. “Look,” she breathed.

They came to a stop at the crest of a hill, their horses puffing heavy clouds of mist into the wind. Down in the distance snaked a placid river, as wide across as two rovers parked end to end. The forest was dark and thick on both sides, except for a four- or five-hundred-foot stretch where sandy shores were visible on either side of the water. Clarke could just make out the tips of round, pointed huts nestled among the trees on each bank.

“That’s it,” Octavia said, Lincoln’s notebook in hand.

Clarke set off down the hill. She and Octavia made it across the field that separated the hill from the forest, into the woods that surrounded Burou, and all the way to the village limit, where the dirt became sandy and the breeze smelled like fresh mud. Just when Clarke thought they were going to break straight through into the clusters of huts, a Grounder dropped out of the trees above and landed in her path.

“Hod op!”

Clarke managed to hold back a shout of surprise, but her horse wasn’t so composed. It reared up with a shriek, which made Octavia’s horse buck up close behind. By the time they regained their balance and control of the horses, a second Grounder was rushing at them through the trees.

The two men circled close, each holding a long spear high enough to throw. One reached out to grab Octavia’s reins, and the other Clarke’s.

It seemed their reputation had preceded them.

“Osir komba raun bilaik lukot,” Octavia announced, holding up her hands. “We come as friends.”

“We know why you come,” said the taller of the men in a thick Trigedasleng accent, adjusting his grip on his spear.

“You know wrong.” Octavia untied the knife at her waist and tossed it to the ground, then dispensed with the sword strapped to her back. The shorter Grounder kicked the weapons away, then nodded. Octavia hopped down from her saddle, hands still raised. “Clarke,” she beckoned.

Clarke’s attention was trained on the dwellings on the other side of the trees, and the faint movement of people in the distance. There were answers here. She could feel it. Somehow, she knew this was where she was supposed to be—now, not after these branwadas were done interrogating her.

“We have to explain ourselves,” Octavia hissed, neck craned up. “This is their village. They have a right to protect it.”

Distantly, Clarke nodded. She adjusted the leather satchel of supplies from her mother that she wore on her back, then swung one leg over her saddle. She was about to slip down when the wind shifted.
She froze.

Her head snapped toward the riverbank. The air.

It smelled like—

Just for a second, it had smelled like—

Clarke dropped to ground, her heart in her throat. This _was_ where she was supposed to be.

_Now_.

She reached for the gun in her waistband and tossed it into the sandy leaves near her feet. When the Grounders instinctively tipped their spears at it, she spun toward the village and made a run for it.

“_Hod op!”_ cried one of the village guards.

He was an alpha, Clarke realized, because the boom of his voice made her stumble with the urge to obey. Before he could try his command again, she heard a heavy _whomp_, then the clash of flesh and fists.

_Thank you, O._

Her pulse raced as she regained her footing and emerged from the forest. She found herself among circular huts made of wood and reeds. They were larger than the homes in Tondc, each built upon a platform a foot or so off the ground. The closer she ran to the river’s edge, the more dense the huts became. Villagers glanced at her with curiosity, but she didn’t slow down long enough to look back at them.

Somehow, her gut knew which way to go—or maybe it was her nose. She wasn’t so naive to think it was destiny, or premonition, or the wisdom of the Flame in her pocket. And yet her feet seemed to move of their own power, closer and closer to whatever magnetic force had made her turn her back on two sharpened spears.

Clarke didn’t know Costia’s mother’s face, or her scent, or her home, and she wouldn’t recognize any of the three if they were set down right in front of her. But maybe she did know the smell of a mother’s grief. Maybe she had seen a fine-forged hut out of the corner of her eye and had subconsciously known it must belong to an artisan. Or maybe it was only madness that told her to keep going—to cross the river and search the huts on the other bank.

She stopped short at the water’s edge, then glanced back over her shoulder. Villagers wringing out their wash blinked nervously back at her, and one man nudged a small boy behind his legs. But the warriors from the woods were nowhere to be seen. Octavia must have managed to occupy them, at least for now. Clarke tried not to think of what might have happened to her friend in the process. The other omega was still fighting—she had to be, or else the guards would have already caught up.

Rope crossings traversed the river at odd intervals, creating an uneven zipper between the village’s two banks. Clarke hesitated to call them bridges, for each one was made of only two twisted vines—one to creep along like a tightrope, and one overhead for balance.

As she stepped out onto the nearest rope, she saw that the water that had looked placid from the hill was anything but. It rushed and gurgled beneath her feet, and she couldn’t help but think of the surging waterfall that had almost killed her the day she escaped from Mount Weather. She took gulping breaths as she crossed, partially to replace the air she’d lost in her sprint for the riverbank, and partially to remind herself she wasn’t drowning.
The thirty-odd seconds of deep breathing restored some of Clarke’s reason. When she dropped down into the wet sand on the other side of the river, her determination faltered. There were dozens more huts here, and they were all just like the huts at her back. Suddenly, the thought that she could somehow intuit which held Costia’s mother seemed like the worst kind of foolishness. The kind that was going to get her banned from Trikru villages for good—or get Octavia killed.

But she had come this far, and Octavia was a skilled warrior in her own right. And something had bought Clarke here, across this river to this corner of this village. So when an old Grounder man glanced up from the fishing net he was detangling and demanded to know who she was, Clarke’s reply was a breathless question of her own.

“Weron Kostia kom Trikru nomon?”

She didn’t actually expect the man to tell her where Costia’s mother lived, and he did not. But he glanced worriedly over his shoulder, and that was answer enough.

Clarke shot off toward the hut he had inadvertently pointed to, ignoring the old fisherman’s protests. It stood twenty or so feet away, behind a communal cooking pit that was currently unoccupied. Her heart thudded in time with her footfalls as she raced for it.

When she reached the hut, she sprung up onto the platform ledge that jutted out like a front step, oblivious to the mud that squelched around her boots. She knocked hard on the door, but she hardly felt the rough wood beneath her knuckles. She hardly heard the sound of it over the blood rushing in her ears.

After what felt like eons, the door jostled, then creaked open. A middle-aged woman peered out from behind it, all worried eyes and tight-pressed lips.

Clarke struggled to find her voice, but the woman beat her to it.

“Klark.”

Clarke grasped the door frame to keep her balance. “How did you—?”

The force of her grip nudged the door open an inch wider, and then her knees almost buckled for a different reason.

That smell. It was the same one she had caught on the wind in the woods. Unsettling but soothing. Foreign but familiar. Clarke dug her nails into the reeds around the door.

It couldn’t be—

It wasn’t quite—

And yet, it was.

She surged forward into the hut, knocking past the woman’s outstretched arm. If it had been her senses that spurred her through the village, it was blind instinct that drove her now. She shoved past a pile of furs and knocked into a three-legged table, but she didn’t feel its corner bite into her thigh.

She had only one goal. The door at the back of the hut.

It took Clarke two more steps to reach it. It was a thick curtain of hung reeds more than a proper door, and she didn’t slow down. She burst through the dried river grass, not caring how it stung, then came to a sudden stop on the other side.
The air left Clarke’s lungs in a rush.

She couldn’t move. Couldn’t speak. Couldn’t breathe.

When the world threatened to close in on her, Clarke toppled to her knees. Her eyes were trained on a mattress against the wall, and the person who lay upon it.

Still.

Silent.

“Lexa.”

Chapter End Notes

I’M SORRY!

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*Joken* - fucking  
*Gona* - warrior(s)  
*Gapa* - horse(s)  
*Wan-klika* - death key  
*Osir ste lufa won au. Kostia kom Trikru nomon o nontu.* - We’re looking for someone. Costia of the Woods Clan’s parents.  
*Nou* - no  
*Beja* - please  
*Yo don get em in?* - did you know her?  
*Yo ste lufa Kosti a au?* - you’re looking for Costia?  
*Yu yongon ste yuj* - your children are strong  
*Nontu* - father  
*Mochof* - thank you  
*Sis au* - help  
*Fayagon* - gun  
*Hod op* - stop  
*Osir komba raun bilaik lukot* - we come as friends  
*Branwada* - fool(s)  
*Weron Kostia kom Trikru nomon?* - where is Costia of the Woods Clan’s mother?
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Clarke has found what she sought—but is it the miracle she hoped for?

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the long delay! Clexacon was incredible but did me in for a few days, so I got a little behind schedule. On the bright side, this chapter is the longest yet—and might be the moment you’ve been waiting for?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Clarke pitched forward where she knelt. Her palms landed on the worn wooden planks of the hut floor. The bag of supplies her mother had given her tumbled the short distance to the ground, but she hardly noticed. She half-crawled, half-shuffled the rest of the way across the unfamiliar room, to the overstuffed mattress that lay against the outer wall.

She heard the reed curtain in the doorway behind her rustle, but she didn’t turn around. She didn’t care who was there. She didn’t care about anyone—about anything—but the woman on the mattress.

“Lexa.” Clarke’s voice was thick and strangled. “Oh my god, Lexa.”

The Commander of the Twelve Clans—the alpha, The Alpha—one tall and invincible, lay on her back with her eyes shut.

She didn’t move when Clarke said her name. She didn’t move when Clarke hovered above the mattress, shaking and dizzy, too scared to reach out and touch the pale arm that was just inches from her own knees. Clarke was sure the slightest brush of her fingertips would shatter the dream before her. With just a single touch, she would find herself back in Polis, clinging to the commander’s blood-soaked bed.

But she had to know.

She had to know if Lexa was breathing.

She reached one trembling hand toward the lips she thought she would never see again. They were open and slack.

In sleep, she prayed. Sleeping, sleeping, sleeping.

Before she could get close enough to feel Lexa’s breath on her palm, Clarke took a quivering inhale of her own—the first real breath she’d drawn since she’d entered this room and tumbled to her knees. All at once, her nose clogged with alpha—with pain and fear, with dominance, with that intoxicating mix of power and tenderness that was Lexa alone. It had been obscured by unfamiliar herbs and stale, sickly sweat, but it was there.
And it was achingly, unbelievably, undeniably alive.

A staggering smile split across Clarke’s face. She toppled forward, one hand sinking into the crinkly straw mattress. She had hesitated before, but now she couldn’t possibly touch Lexa enough. The alpha’s skin was warm under her fingertips, and Clarke’s hands skated over every single inch that was exposed outside the thin linen sheet tucked around her armpits.

“You’re real,” Clarke choked out, as much a laugh as a sob. Tears streamed down her face. Salt ran into her mouth, and the droplets splashed onto Lexa’s upper arm—less muscular than when Clarke seen it last, but no less perfect. No less whole, and here, and perfect. “Lexa, oh my god. You’re alive.”

After a few more moments of soul-shaking bliss, Clarke’s brain caught up with her hands. Lexa wasn’t just warm—she was hot.

And she still hadn’t opened her eyes.

“How?” Clarke shook her bare shoulders gently, then with more force. “Lexa, wake up. Lexa.” She could feel her control slipping, and more tears spilling over. She could smell her own anguished pheromones fill the room. Could tell she was shaking Lexa too hard, too fast, too long—and still nothing. “Lexa, please. Lexa.”

A soft hand landed on Clarke’s shoulder. “She hasn’t woken since the night she arrived.”

Clarke jerked, her head snapping back. Standing behind her was the woman who had opened the front door of the hut when she knocked. The woman she had jostled aside when she’d caught a trace of Lexa’s scent on the air.

“Costia’s mom,” she managed to whisper, as if that were any sort of greeting.

The woman didn’t respond, but the glimmer in her eyes was answer enough. It was proud and haunted at the same time. “When she did wake, Heda said Klark,” the woman went on, one eyebrow raised. “Which is the only reason I didn’t knock you onto your bakon when you barged into my home.” Her words were stern, but her voice spoke of exhaustion and relief, and maybe even a hint of affection. “A Sky girl with hair like straw, Nyko told me. He’s no poet, is he?”

Clarke’s head was spinning. “Nyko,” she repeated dumbly. It seemed she had been right about him, if little else—including what she had expected to find here in this riverside village. “He took Lexa from the tower and brought her here.”

“Who else, child?” Costia’s mother shook her head sadly. “Who else is left for her?”

Me, Clarke wanted to say, her heart in her throat. I should have brought her. I should have saved her. But that was a fool’s dream, Clarke knew. If she had taken Lexa from Polis instead of Nyko, they never would have made it here. She would have ridden for Arkadia, for lack of other options, and Lexa would have been shot by the Sky People as surely as she had been by her own.

“I thought— I thought maybe he’d brought her to her family.”

Costia’s mother gave a weary sigh. “I suppose you’d call me the closest thing.” Her hand found Clarke’s shoulder again and squeezed. “And you, now?” she ventured.

Clarke nodded, then quickly blushed. Despite the magnitude of her feelings for Lexa, family was a presumptuous thing to claim after a single day in the alpha’s bed. And it mortified her to think of Lexa’s bed at all here in the house of the dead girl she had loved. Here in front of that poor girl’s
“Sorry about before,” Clarke said, eyes cast down at Lexa’s still face. “I didn’t mean to intrude. I just…”

Costia’s mother crouched beside the mattress, knees popping. She covered Clarke’s hand with her own. Clarke hadn’t realized she was still clutching Lexa’s forearm until the woman gently unhooked her fingers, one by one, leaving nail-shaped indentations in their wake. “You just needed her,” she finished.

A fresh lump rose in Clarke’s throat. She managed a jerky nod.

“Well,” Costia’s mother said, like that settled the matter. Her gaze flicked to Clarke’s throat, probably to check for a mating bite. Finding it unmarked didn’t change her soft expression. She looked thoughtfully back to Lexa, then brushed a strand of hair from her sticky forehead. “Maybe she needed you, too. Her breathing hasn’t been so calm all day.”

Clarke used her sleeve to wipe surreptitiously at the corners of her eyes. When she could see properly again, she followed the woman’s gaze over Lexa’s fluttering eyelashes and chapped, blue-tinged lips, to the almost imperceptible rise and fall of the sheet stretched across her breasts.

The joy in Clarke’s heart felt too big for her chest to contain. Too big for this room, or this village, or this planet. But as she drank in the sweat on Lexa’s brow and the prominence of her cheekbones, the joy was tempered by terror just as tremendous.

Lexa drew a long, rattling breath, and Clarke forced herself to let the healer inside her rise up and take over.

She pressed two fingers to Lexa’s wrist to take her pulse, then cleared her throat. “How long has it been? Since she was conscious.”

Costia’s mother stood up slowly, hands on her back, as if it were an effort to make her limbs line back up. “She stirs enough to mumble from time to time, but I wouldn’t call that awake. Not since the night Nyko came knocking. She roused when he started to fix the stitches that came undone on the way.” Her arms snaked subconsciously around her own stomach, which was covered in layered Grounder fabrics, worn but clean. “We had nothing for the pain, but I make a strong sleep liquid. Nyko triple-dosed her for days, until he thought she was healed enough to stand how it hurt. But that was when the sweating set in.”

Clarke’s stomach flipped. Two and a half weeks. It had been more than two and a half weeks since Lexa was fully awake. She raced through the reasons the alpha might still be unconscious after all this time, and each was more distressing than the last. “How did…? What did…?”

Before Clarke could decide which of her thousand desperate questions to ask, there was a pounding at the front door. She heard a muffled shout in Trigedasleng, and then, “Felia?”

Costia’s mother’s eyes grew wide with alarm. “Who followed you?”

“What? No one.”

There came another sharp knock.

“Get up. Come.” The woman took Clarke’s elbow and tugged her upright—and away from Lexa. Clarke tried to wrench free, but the hand on her arm was strong, and she was running on days of meager rations. “Come,” the woman growled, pulling Clarke toward the thick reeds that served as a
door between this room and the main one. “Or do you want whoever is out there to come in here?”

With a panicked glance at the unconscious commander, Clarke shook her head. She fell in step behind Costia’s mother, who was already pushing through the reeds. Though it felt like torture to let Lexa out of her sight, Clarke followed her into the front room.

She hadn’t noticed much about the hut during her hasty entrance, but now her eyes raked over the small space as she considered how she might defend it. A neat circle of river rocks supported a small cook fire, currently extinguished. On Clarke’s other side sat the three-legged table she had knocked into in her frenzy to get inside. Narrow shelves lined the light brown walls, holding food stores and finely carved wooden boxes and mementos. Behind her were the reeds that hid Lexa, and an identical door a few feet further along the wall must have led to a third room.

“Felia!” called the voice outside again, whatever that meant. The hut’s front door rattled on its primitive hinges.

“Nyko is out gathering supplies,” Costia’s mother hissed. “There is only us to keep them away.” With that, she left Clarke standing by Lexa’s door.

Clarke reached for the gun in her waistband, only to remember that she’d dropped it at the feet of the village guards who had stopped her and Octavia in the forest. Frantic, she glanced about for a makeshift weapon. An iron poker leaned against the rocks by the fire. The last thing she wanted was to move even further from Lexa, but she would be a useless protector with nothing to defend herself. She took a quick step toward the poker. Before she could reach it, Costia’s mother reached for the door.

As she pulled it open, the strong woman who had yanked Clarke up from the floor seemed to disappear. Costia’s mother shrank several inches in height, and her voice became soft as she spoke to the man at the door. “Sha? Is something wrong?”

Clarke hovered in the shadows, halfway between Lexa’s doorway and the fire pit. She could glimpse enough over Costia’s mother’s shoulder to recognize who she was talking to. It was the shorter of the two guards Clarke had met in the woods. Frantic, she glanced about for a makeshift weapon. An iron poker leaned against the rocks by the fire. The last thing she wanted was to move even further from Lexa, but she would be a useless protector with nothing to defend herself. She took a quick step toward the poker. Before she could reach it, Costia’s mother reached for the door.

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Clarke hovered in the shadows, halfway between Lexa’s doorway and the fire pit. She could glimpse enough over Costia’s mother’s shoulder to recognize who she was talking to. It was the shorter of the two guards Clarke had met in the woods. The older woman had been right—Clarke had led him straight here. The guard tried to peer around Costia’s mother and into the hut, but her round, hunched body filled the open doorway.

Inch by inch, Clarke edged closer to the poker. No matter what happened, she would not let the warrior come in. She would not let him find Lexa.

The young alpha started to speak, his voice deep and dominant.“Osir don sen in—”

“What did you hear about, now?” Costia’s mother interrupted warmly, with just a hint of curiosity. Before the warrior could answer, she seemed to forget about the question altogether. “Oh Dein, it’s so nice to see you in the village. You must get so cold out in the trees all the time. Tell me, how is your mother?”

The guard—Dein, apparently—faltered for a moment, then collected himself. “We heard that—”

“How lucky she is.” Costia’s mother reached out and patted his cheek. She couldn’t have been much older than Clarke’s own mom, but she seemed to have aged into a kindly grandmother in the seconds it had taken her to open the door. “Such a strong boy.” Her voice wavered. “And still with her after all these years of war.”

Dein shifted his weight uneasily. “Sha, Felia. She knows she is lucky.”
Felie, Clarke realized. Not a Trigedasleng term she hadn’t learned yet, but a name.

Dein cleared his throat. “Please. We heard—”

“How different life would be, were my own little one still with me,” Felie said. Clarke saw a tremor run through her, and she couldn’t help but wonder how much of this was really a performance.

“Beja, Felia, listen to me,” begged the put-upon alpha. “You are in danger. A village to the south sent word that two Skaikru would come to Burou to hurt you. One of them got away from us. She could already be preparing to strike, and Heda’s warriors are no longer here to protect you.”

It took all the strength left in Clarke’s heart to keep creeping across the room instead of scrambling back to Lexa’s side. But she nearly had the fire poker. If she stretched her arm and leaned over just so—

“Oh, you must mean Clarke. It’s so kind of you to check on me, Dein. You know how lonely an old widow gets. Clarke, come over here and introduce yourself.”

Clarke froze, her hand hovering above the poker. Felia had turned sideways in the doorway, and suddenly Clarke had a direct line of sight to the alpha warrior—and he to her.

“That’s the girl from the woods,” he growled, his hand tightening on his spear. He moved to step into the hut, but Felia put a gentle hand on his chest.

“Please, goufa. I just scrubbed the floors, and look at those boots.”

While the guard glanced down at his muddy shoes, Felia widened her eyes at Clarke, then the poker. Her face hardened as she shook her head. The message was clear.

Don’t you dare.

In a flash, Clarke imagined a dozen scenarios in which she lunged for the weapon in plain view of the guard. Each one ended with the entire village of Burou descending upon Felia’s hut—and Lexa. With a grimace, she balled her hand into a fist and crossed the room to stand beside Felia.

Now that she was closer to the door, she could see it wasn’t only Dein who had come calling. Standing on the ground outside was the second guard from the woods. And with him—

“Octavia! Are you okay?”

Octavia’s hands were bound with rope, and a small trickle of blood ran down from her hairline, but she gave a curt nod. Wounded pride appeared to be the worst of her injuries.

While Felia cast a searching look between the two omegas, Clarke let out a breath of relief. She turned her attention to the warrior on the stoop.

“Hei,” she greeted, struggling to suppress her nerves. “Ai laik Klark.” Following Felia’s lead, she cast her eyes meekly downward. She wanted to turn the stony countenance of Wanheda on him instead, but she had to play the next moments exactly right. If she made a single misstep, this could still end with all of Burou’s warriors tearing into Felia’s hut. The older woman had kept Lexa hidden all these days; Clarke had to trust that she knew what she was doing.

Felia hooked her arm through Clarke’s elbow. “Does she look like an assassin to you, Dein?” The touch felt soft and motherly, but Clarke knew it was to keep her from doing something rash as much as it was to sell their story to the guards. “Klark kom Skaikru and her friend knew my Nyko in
Polis,” Felia said. “He invited them to visit. Can you believe they traveled all that way just for me? Sweet girls.”

For reasons Clarke couldn’t fathom, Dein’s ears turned pink at the mention of my Nyko.

The taller guard behind him stepped forward. “I know that name,” he said, tightening his grip on Octavia. Angry alpha pheromones wafted from him, and it was all Clarke could do not to cover her nose. “Klark kom Skaikru is Wanheda. And she was carrying a fayagon.”

Felia tensed. Clarke could guess what she was thinking. How could they brand Clarke as a harmless little omega if the guards knew she was the one who’d slain the Mountain? This conversation needed to end, and fast. “I gave you the gun, didn’t I?” Clarke said, fighting to keep the edge out of her voice. “I don’t have any other weapons. You can check.”

Before Dein could ask any more questions—like why Clarke had run from him if her intentions were so pure—Felia cut in. “Clarke is only a bit younger than my own baby would have been, did you know that, Dein?” With her free hand, she clasped a pendant that hung from her neck on a leather cord. “Doesn’t she remind you of her? My Costia?”

The name had both of the guards standing up straighter, eyes wide with discomfort.

From the way Felia clenched Clarke’s arm, she had known it would have this effect. “Oh, boys, I’m so glad you stopped by. Say hello to your mothers for me, won’t you? How fortunate they are.”

“But—”

“I would invite you both in for a mug of souda, but the girls and I have so much to talk about.” Felia beckoned for Octavia. “Come in, goufa. Clarke has told me all about you,” she lied.

Dein looked flabbergasted. “Felia, the Skaikru—”

“Oh, please, Dein.” Felia’s voice shook, and Clarke sensed she was about to drive the last nail into the coffin. “Just look at her.” She tugged Clarke closer. “You wouldn’t deny me the chance to look into the eyes of my little one again, even if they are in this Skayon’s face. Would you?”

Clarke’s stomach churned, but Felia’s words had their intended effect. Dein gave a short, frustrated bow. He stepped down from the hut and motioned to the guard behind him, who relaxed his grip on the rope that bound Octavia’s wrists. She yanked her hands away from him and reached the hut in three strides.

“We will be close if you need us, Felia,” Dein said. He eyed Clarke and Octavia, who now stood in his place on the hut platform.

“Sha, of course.” Felia managed a smile. “We’ll try not to get up to too much trouble, won’t we girls?”

Dein sighed, and it was obvious he wanted to roll his eyes instead. Clarke could practically hear the exasperated complaint he just managed to hold back. Omegas.

Before he could say another word, Felia whisked Clarke and Octavia inside.

The second the door thumped into its frame, the older woman’s timid mannerisms vanished. Before Clarke could blink, Felia had seized Octavia by the neck and shoved her back against the hut wall. All of a sudden there was a knife in her hand, and Clarke realized she must have had one hidden in her clothing the entire time.
"Who are you?" Felia hissed. She held Octavia’s throat in one hand and pressed the blade to her skin with the other. Octavia thrashed, but she could do little to defend herself with her hands tied.

"Hey!" Clarke cried, tugging on Felia’s arm. “Stop, she’s with me.”

“Nyko told me of Klark kom Skaikru, and her mother the alpha healer,” Felia growled at Octavia. “No one else.” She had grown tall again, and her expression resembled the look Clarke imagined a mother bear might wear as she stood between her cub and a hunter.

Only the cub wasn’t Costia. It was Lexa.

All at once, Clarke realized what had Felia in such a panic. “She already knows,” she said quickly. “She already knows Lexa is alive. Octavia’s the one who got me here, and she held off the guards in the woods. Let her go.”

Gradually, Felia’s eyes softened. Soon, her grip on the knife did, too. “Okteivia,” she echoed, the consonants clicking in that distinctive Trigedasleng way. “Maybe I have heard this name. Nyko mentioned a friend who mated a sky girl called Octavia.”

Octavia glared down at the floor, her eyes full of pain.

“Oh,” Felia murmured. “I am sorry, child.”

She removed her hand from Octavia’s throat, and the omega took a shuddering breath. She opened her mouth, no doubt to ask Clarke what the hell was going on here, but a sharp cough from the other room cut her off.

Octavia’s eyes widened. “Is that—?”

Clarke spun on her heel. She didn’t hear the rest of Octavia’s question, for she was already hurtling through the reeds and into the sickroom.

She sucked in a gasp. “Lexa?”

The alpha’s bloodshot eyes had opened sometime while she was fussing with the guards. For a minute or a split second, Clarke couldn’t say. By the time she reached Lexa’s side, they were already fluttering shut again.

She was caught between ecstatic laughter and a cry of frustration as she knelt beside the mattress and gently shook the alpha’s shoulders. Lexa had opened her eyes. She had given Clarke a glimpse, however brief, into the evergreen depths she had thought she would never see again. But the alpha still wasn’t awake.

Clarke felt the side of Lexa’s neck. Her pulse was quick and jumpy, but it was the clammy skin under her fingers that worried Clarke most. If Lexa had been hot before, she was scalding now—and yet she shivered violently under Clarke’s touch.

Lexa had a fever.

A fever meant infection.

And for someone who had just been shot, infection meant death.

Clarke understood now why the fire was out, and why Lexa was covered with only a sheet while a pile of thick furs sat in the main room. The Grounders knew enough about the human body to
understand that the shivering of a fever meant a patient was too hot instead of too cold—but they hadn’t figured out that cooling Lexa down would do nothing to cure the underlying cause of her suffering. They hadn’t realized that treating a fever was for comfort, not survival.

Behind Clarke, the reeds rustled.

“Wanheda.”

Clarke turned to find a face in the doorway that she hadn’t seen in weeks—bearded, tattooed, fierce. It belonged to the man she had to thank for the living, breathing alpha before her. “Nyko.”

“You got my message,” said the beta healer, his voice rumbling with relief.

Clarke frowned. “What message?”

Nyko carried in a woven basket full of tubular roots still caked with dirt. Felia followed him, holding a bucket of water and a rag. “I sent a rider to you in Polis when Heda’s condition became stable,” Nyko said. “I had thought we would see you sooner.”

Clarke wanted to ask why Nyko would have sent word to her and not to Indra, the highest-ranking Trikru general—but she had begun to suspect that the people around her had been aware of her connection to Lexa long before she’d understood it herself. Besides, Nyko would have smelled her on Lexa’s body when he carried the commander from the tower. Only the hundred dire worries in Clarke’s mind kept her from flushing red.

She glanced down at Lexa, aching with regret. How much more quickly could she have gotten here, if only Nyko’s messenger had reached her? How much of a difference could her Skaikru medical training have made? “Your rider didn’t make it,” she said, unable to keep the bitter twinge from her voice. “Or if they did, they got chipped.”

“Chipped,” Nyko repeated, turning the unfamiliar word over in his mouth. Then he seemed to make a connection. “Wan-klika? I have heard talk of this from travelers in the woods.”

Clarke nodded. She was glad to hear his confusion, because it confirmed that Burou was one of the villages A.L.I.E.’s final solution hadn’t had time to reach. “Chipped means… their mind was taken over. I’ll explain later.”

On the other side of the room, Nyko set his basket down beside an old crate that served as a stool. Felia sank onto it and set to work cleaning the roots he had collected. “The meat inside makes a salve to help Heda breathe,” Felia said, answering Clarke’s unspoken question. “How did you find us, then, child? How did you even know to look?”

As Clarke recounted her journey from Polis, she watched Lexa’s chest rise and fall. She told Felia of the bloody cot, and the bullet in the drawer, and the dozens of people who had seen the commander’s lifeless body, but never her face. All of the remnants of Lexa that had made Clarke’s heart thud with hope that the fantasy in front of her would one day become a reality—and now it had.

“It was Octavia who thought of—” Clarke’s forehead creased with worry. “Where is Octavia?”

“I didn’t kill her, goufa,” Felia said with a touch of amusement. “She’s in the fire room, resting.”

From the warmth in her voice, Clarke suspected that Felia and Octavia had made fast friends in the few moments they’d been alone together, once Felia realized she wasn’t a threat. She shouldn’t have been surprised. To Octavia’s sensibilities, a Grounder knife to the throat was a like a cheerful
welcoming committee.

Chagrined, Clarke started again. “It was Octavia who thought of looking for you. She thought you might know where we could find Lexa’s family because of…” Clarke remembered the way the Grounders reacted to the name Costia, and she swallowed the syllables.

“You can say it,” Felia whispered. Her eyes had become glassy, but she smiled. “No one does, but you don’t know how I long to hear it.”

It had been Lexa, Clarke realized, not Felia. It had been Lexa who had abolished the speaking of Costia’s name. Maybe by explicit command, or maybe because Heda’s grief and rage had frightened the sound right out of her people’s mouths.

Clarke cleared her throat. “Because of Costia,” she finished. “But neither of us ever imagined…” Her voice trembled as she thought of all the hopeless nights she and Octavia had spent in the woods, and the many she had thought were yet to come. It was still difficult to believe she hadn’t dreamed all of this up. “I never thought… Until I smelled…”

As her voice trailed off, Nyko knelt down beside her. “May I?” he said softly. When Clarke nodded, he leaned forward to check the commander’s pulse. He had to feel for it on her wrist because Clarke’s fingers were still resting gently on Lexa’s neck.

For as long as either of them lived, Clarke would never, ever get enough of Lexa’s heartbeat.

“It’s infected, isn’t it?” she whispered.

The memory of the jagged hole in Lexa’s body had haunted her every moment of these last long weeks. Now that the commander lay before her, she couldn’t bring herself to roll down the linen sheet and look at the wound. Not again. Not when she was so sure that what she would find would be even worse than that awful day in the tower.

An infection in a wound of that magnitude was sure to have entered Lexa’s bloodstream by now. Clarke knew there would be nothing in the leather satchel her mother had given her that was strong enough to treat sepsis, nor the deadly organ failure that would soon follow. There had been little demand for powerful intravenous antibiotics in the Ark’s sealed and sanitized environment, and those Abby did keep on hand were still in Arkadia—if there were even any left at all.

“No, Wanheda.”

Nyko’s words startled Clarke from the dismal downward spiral of her thoughts. She glanced up at him, confused. “No?”

“Heda’s wound has closed.”

Clarke’ brow furrowed as she stared at Lexa’s feverish face. “Then—?”

“I don’t know.” Nyko rocked back on his heels, dragging his hand from his forehead to his beard. Clarke realized then how exhausted he looked. “I hoped you would tell me.”

Clarke wanted to believe he was right, but Lexa’s ashen skin told her that he wasn’t—that there was some sign of infection he had missed. She would have no choice but to assess the damage for herself. As much as the thought of the gunshot made her want to double over and vomit, she had to know what they were dealing with. She couldn’t have come all this way—Lexa couldn’t have lived all this time, against all odds—just for her to watch the commander fade away again.
With a deep breath, Clarke forced her shaking hands to still, then reached out to peel back the sweat-soaked sheet. Slowly, she bared Lexa’s breasts—even smaller than they had been before, but still perfect. Only the fear of what she would find a few inches lower kept her insides from clenching with warmth. As she pushed the covering down to Lexa’s waist, she refused to let herself shut her eyes. Instead, they grew wide.

Nyko was right.

The skin of Lexa’s abdomen was shiny and angry pink, but the gaping hole was gone. Clarke could see uneven bumps of fresh scar tissue and still-raw scabs, but not a single trace of black blood. There were indented red dots where thick stitches had held the flesh together, but the outline of the wound was clean and dry. Clarke didn’t dare say Lexa was healed, but she was whole.

“I don’t understand,” Clarke said. As tenderly as she could, she prodded the edges of the alpha’s injury from one angle and then another. Part of her wished Lexa would flinch in pain, because at least it would mean she was conscious. “It’s not inflamed.”

“No,” Nyko agreed.

“There’s no discharge.”

“No.”

“It’s not even red. Not any more than it should be.”

Nyko sighed. “I know, Clarke.”

She stared down at Lexa’s body, confounded. “Withdrawal?” she wondered aloud, reaching deep into her memory for any other causes of fever her mother had ever mentioned. “From the sleeping medicine, maybe? Or an allergic reaction to it?”

Felia, halfway finished with the basket of roots, looked hurt. Nyko shook his head. “There were no negative signs at the beginning, and I stopped her doses gradually.”

Clarke’s mind raced. An alpha’s oncoming rut could cause a mild fever, but nothing like this. And that would have been accompanied by aggression and bravado, not unconsciousness. With a sudden burst of inspiration, Clarke turned Lexa’s cheek to check the incision on the back of her neck where Titus had removed the Flame. But that cut, too, was clean and closed.

She bit her lip. “An allergy to something else, then? What else did you give her?”

Nyko explained all he and Felia had done to treat the commander, but most of his words soared over Clarke’s head. She wasn’t well versed in homeopathy, and though she tried to make a mental note of any treatments that sounded significant, she guessed that half the plants the beta was describing hadn’t even existed before the bombs fell. She wouldn’t find them in her mom’s medical documents even if she had access. Besides, it was difficult for Clarke to believe that any herb in the world, in any amount, could cause Lexa to sweat and shake like this.

But if not poisoning, what?

For many long moments, the only sound in the room was Lexa’s haggard breathing. The only movements from the commander were violent shivers and an occasional cough. Clarke welcomed the sound, for at least it meant Lexa wasn’t comatose—but she wasn’t awake, either.

Felia was the first to speak, low and gentle. “What Nyko doesn’t want to say, child, is that he fears
“The sickness is down inside. Where we can’t see it.”

Clarke swallowed thickly. “You mean where we can’t treat it.”

Despite the Grounders’ layman’s terms, she knew all three of them were thinking the same thing. That there had to be an infection raging deep beneath the commander’s scarred skin—less visible to the naked eye than a seeping gash, but just as deadly.

For the hundredth time that day, Clarke wished fiercely for her mother. Why, why had she let the last M.D. on Earth stay behind in Polis?

She reached for the only bit of her mom she’d taken with her—the leather satchel Abby had packed full of whatever she could spare from the healer’s hut and her own dwindling stash of Ark supplies. Clarke had only glanced through it once, before leaving Polis. In the forest, it had felt like a foolish tempt of fate to run her fingers over the objects and imagine how she would use them to treat Lexa—like a surefire way to guarantee she would never get the chance.

Now, Clarke tipped the bag on end and scattered the motley assortment of supplies across the floor. She counted two thick Grounder bandages, a black pen, thread for sutures, a scalpel made from a razor blade and a whittled stick, and a handful of other makeshift tools. Her heart clenched with gratitude when she saw a long plastic tube with a needle sticking out of one end and a syringe monkey-patched into the other. Despite what her mother had told her about blood—that if Lexa still needed it, she was already dead—Abby had given her a transfusion kit just in case.

“What is the medicine?” Nyko asked.

He nudged aside another bandage, and Clarke realized it was hiding a strip of small blue squares of foil. There were ten or twelve squares in all, each one bubbled in the middle. Clarke stretched for the pills, praying for a miracle. Her heart sank when she picked them up and read the tiny words printed on each package, then the number of milligrams below.

“It’s amoxicillin,” she said. At Nyko’s confused stare, she elaborated. “An antibiotic. It treats bacterial infections.” When he began to look hopeful, Clarke shook her head. “Not this. Not something this bad. The dosage is too low. These are for… kids’ ear infections.” She let out a hollow, defeated laugh. “For strep throat.”

Felia sat forward on her stool. “Shouldn’t we give them to her anyway? Can’t we try?”

Clarke scraped the back of her hand across her eyes, which were suddenly wet. She didn’t want to get into the details of antibiotic resistance, or how administering drugs in such a pitiful dose might do nothing but kill the good bacteria in Lexa’s body—that a Hail Mary in the form of a fat pink pill might weaken the commander’s immune system to the point that she’d never be able to fight off the plague beneath her skin.

Then, with a frustrated groan, Clarke pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead.

She had to stop thinking like she was still on the Ark, where she had the luxury of being choosy. If Lexa’s gunshot wound was infected beneath the scar tissue, her own blood would kill her long before the side effects of lowly, low-dose amoxicillin ever could. Unless Clarke could figure out what was wrong and find a cure, Lexa was going to die anyway.

“Yeah,” she croaked. “We can try.”

“Good.” Felia breathed out her approval in a heavy sigh. Nyko, though, seemed to sense Clarke’s defeat. He nodded, but he didn’t look optimistic.
Clarke gripped Lexa’s limp hand. The only response was a shuddering wheeze.

“…Wait.”

She frowned, glancing down at the foil packets she’d let fall to the floor. Even if she did want to try giving Lexa the pills, they were pills. The commander was hardly in a state to sit up and swallow them.

And yet, Nyko and Felia had to be feeding Lexa somehow. Without some sort of sustenance, she would have succumbed to dehydration by now. Slowly, gears began to turn in Clarke’s mind.

“How have you been giving her food and water?”

Nyko didn’t have the Ark’s IV drips or feeding tubes, and Clarke knew from experience that Grounders who were injured enough to need either were more likely to be put out of their misery than taken to a healer. But this was no ordinary Grounder. This was Heda—or had been. It was obvious Nyko had taken extraordinary measures.

“I make a thin broth,” Felia said. “I sit her against my chest, and Nyko dribbles it into her mouth. We tried to mix in grains when we thought she was improving, but…” She looked away.

Clarke could smell the traces of Felia’s distress. “But what?”

“She choked.” Felia’s eyes filled, and she scrubbed hard at an invisible spot of dirt on one of the roots. “I thought I’d made it fine enough, but she started sputtering like I’ve never heard. I was sure I’d killed her.”

As if on cue, Lexa began to cough, thick and rasping.

The gears in Clarke’s mind were picking up speed. “When?” she demanded. When Felia didn’t answer in her first breath, Clarke turned to Nyko. “When did she choke?”

Nyko glanced from Clarke to the commander, his confusion plain. “Not long before I stopped the sleeping liquid.”

She gripped Nyko’s tattooed arm. “You mean right before the fever set in? Within a day or two?”

Clarke’s heart pounded in time with her thumping, stuttering hope. She could almost hear her mother’s clipped alpha voice in the Medical Bay. Fever. Chills. Cough. Shortness of breath. Blue lips. What is the diagnosis, Clarke?

Apprehensive, Nyko nodded.

Clarke let him go. She slumped forward over Lexa’s body, but inside her heart soared. For one insane moment, she wanted to laugh.

Still, she had to be sure.

She crouched down closer, pressing her ear to Lexa’s chest. This time she wasn’t interested in a heartbeat. She held up a hand to stop the bewildered questions on Nyko and Felia’s lips, and then she held her own breath.

Without a stethoscope, it was a struggle to discern the din of the village outside from the sounds in Lexa’s lungs, and harder still to isolate the specific indicators she was listening for. Then all at once, like a ringing in her ears she’d just remembered, Clarke heard it clearly.
A rattle.
A bubble.
A click.

She did laugh then—unconsciously—joyously—dizzy with relief and the irony of it all. The commander had won hundreds of deadly battles, only to be brought down by a single stray bullet that was intended to save her life. So of course—of course Lexa had survived a trip across the Coalition with a mortal wound, only to be defeated by the very fluids that were meant to keep her alive.

Clarke let her forehead roll forward onto Lexa’s damp chest. She clutched the tangled hair at the alpha’s nape with one hand and the bunched-up bed sheet with the other. Tears ran over her nose and into her mouth, which had broken into a grin of exalted disbelief. Lexa did have an infection—it just wasn’t the death sentence she had feared.

“It’s okay,” she whispered. “You’re going to be okay.”

She was glad to be facing away from Nyko and Felia, because she knew she was doing an abysmal job concealing the ecstasy she felt as she buried her face into Lexa’s warm skin, or the way her inner omega howled—no longer a plea, but a war cry.

Mine, mine, mine. Alive, alive, alive.

After many stammering breaths, when her tears finally slowed, Clarke made herself straighten up. It was clear from Nyko and Felia’s faces that though they may not have seen the feelings Clarke was trying to hide, they could definitely smell them. They seemed to smell her relief, too, for they watched her with hopeful, expectant eyes.

“She has pneumonia,” Clarke said, wiping at her cheeks. At their blank looks, she pressed a hand to her breastbone. “A lung infection.”

Nyko studied her hand as if it could explain the medicine to him. “A lung sickness, like after a… cold.” From the halting way he spoke, Clarke knew her mother must have taught him the Gonasleng term. “But Heda has not been ill. Not in that way.”

“A virus is one way to get it. The other way is aspiration. It’s when something—food, water—is inhaled and gets caught in the lungs.”

Felia looked as if she’d been struck, and Clarke felt a flicker of regret that she hadn’t thought to invent a different story. She didn’t blame Costia’s mother for mixing grains into the broth she’d made, or for Lexa’s woeful state. On the contrary, it was a miracle that two Grounders, even one a healer, had managed to keep an unconscious person alive for such a stretch without any of the knowledge or equipment Clarke had been privy to on the Ark.

She hastened to explain. “No, this is good news. I promise, it’s good. This is treatable. This is survivable.”

Clarke picked up the discarded amoxicillin as though it were the Flame itself. Her mother must have thought she was wasting these pills when she stuffed them into the bag. Such a small number at such a low concentration would never, ever have saved Lexa from sepsis—but they could certainly put a dent in pneumonia.

With a sharp inhale, Felia pressed the knobby root she was holding to her chest. “You’re sure?”
Clarke swallowed. She squeezed the strip of pills in her hand until the foil edges of the packaging threatened to slice her skin.

Pneumonia usually meant a visit to the Medical Bay and a few days of antibiotics and observation, then all was well. But Lexa wasn’t a usual patient, and this wasn’t the Ark. All of the commander’s resources had gone to mending the wound in her stomach, and to fighting off the bacteria that must have found its way into the open flesh before it healed. Felia’s broth might have been enough to keep her body functioning at the most basic level, but she had essentially been starving these last two and a half weeks. And for most of them, heavily sedated by who knew what.

Clarke had the handful of amoxicillin, but little else. There were no chest X-rays here. There were no IVs, or ultrasounds, or blood tests. There was no time to waste, and no room for error.

With a shaky breath, she grit her teeth. After all that had happened, she refused to be dragged down by doubts. Not anymore. Not with Lexa. Not when they had already come so far, and suffered so much.

Certainty had taken on a new meaning for Clarke since she had landed on the ground, but she was as certain about this as she had been about anything.

She squared her shoulders, and she looked up at Felia with clear eyes.

“I’m sure.”

Chapter End Notes

_Bakon_ - back
_Osir don sen in... - we heard…
_Sha_ - yes
_Beja_ - please
_Goufa_ - child
_Fayagon_ - gun
_Souda_ - drink
_Skayon_ - Sky Person
_Wan-klika_ - death key
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Sorry it's been ages! The chapters now are about twice as long as they were at the beginning, so they're taking a lot longer to write and edit than they used to. If you guys prefer more frequent short chapters to less frequent long ones, let me know. I can't make any promises, but I'll definitely take the majority vote into account.

I've updated the description and the tags a bit, so a special welcome to those of you just joining us now that one of them is Lexa Lives. I wouldn't have risked reading until now either XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“More,” Costia’s mother said.

Clarke dutifully lifted her spoon to her mouth for another bite. She wasn’t sure what she was eating, sat at the little three-legged table in Felia’s hut, but it was hot and filling and smelled of home—not the metal box she’d grown up in, but some phantom Earthbound memory of generations past. Or maybe it was just that she smelled Lexa sleeping in the other room. Maybe it was Felia’s soft hand on her shoulder, and not her cooking, that settled warm and glowing in the pit of Clarke’s stomach.

The joy that had overcome her when she realized Lexa’s ailments were treatable had quickly sapped what little was left of her energy. She had sagged over Lexa’s mattress, as drained as she was determined. Soon Felia had led her here, a gentle hand under her elbow, with promises that she could slip back through the reed doorway to the commander as soon as she’d had something to eat. She hadn’t realized how hungry and fatigued she was until now.

It seemed the road had caught up with Octavia, too. Felia had started a fire to cook their supper, and the young omega was fast asleep on a fur beside it, knees tucked to her chest.

“We have to send word to Indra,” Clarke said, her voice thick with exhaustion. In between swallows, she used a knife to carefully crush one of the antibiotic tablets against a smooth, flat rock Felia had boiled clean.

Felia was sitting beside her, and she followed Clarke’s gaze to Octavia. “Not by her you don’t,” Felia said, shaking her head. “That girl needs rest and care. It’s a miracle she’s made it this far.”

Nyko sat on Clarke’s other side, working on a bowl of his own. He hummed his agreement.

Clarke glanced between the two of them. “We all need rest. But Indra has to know Lexa is alive. You don’t understand what this means for the Coalition.”

For the entire world.

If Indra knew the commander still lived, it would change her strategy in Polis. The general wouldn’t need to keep the clan leaders in line indefinitely—only until their rightful Heda could return.

“I don’t, do I?” Felia raised her eyebrows. “You think I was always a feeble omega widow?”
Clarke sat back with chagrin. “No, that’s not what I— Wait, you’re an omega, too?”

“She, goufa. I am also a craftswoman who spent many years trading in the capital. I know what this means for our people.”

Clarke felt properly chastised. She knew what it felt like to think someone was judging her based on her biology, even if that wasn’t what she’d meant. But the fact remained that Felia didn’t understand—not really. Not everything. She hadn’t seen the devastation and unrest in Polis. She didn’t know a thing about the nuclear meltdowns, or the impending annihilation that Clarke prayed she would be able to avert with Lexa alive and well at her side.

But Clarke bit her tongue. The hut’s windows had been shuttered to conceal the recovering commander inside, but light still poured in from the smoke escape in the thatched roof. The main room had taken on an orange tinge, which meant evening was near. It was too late for anyone to set out for Polis tonight anyway. Clarke decided she would talk to Octavia about it in the morning, by herself.

In the meantime, she focused on the other part of what Felia had said. “I don’t mean to be rude,” she started hesitantly. “But… if you’re an omega, why can’t I smell you?”

She had been in close proximity to Costia’s mother for the last several hours, and she hadn’t pegged Felia as an omega. In retrospect, she should have guessed it based on the woman’s show of meekness toward the village guards who had come to check up on them—but she’d had a few other things on her mind at the time.

Now that she thought of it, Clarke couldn’t seem to pinpoint Felia as anything at all. And she couldn’t quite make out Nyko or Octavia, either. Nyko was a beta, so a subtle scent was to be expected. But Clarke couldn’t explain why she wasn’t picking up on the two omega women. The dullness in her nose was like being on suppressants all over again—and that was like going back to watching black-and-white videos of Earth on her family’s screen after gorging on the brilliant greens and blues of the real thing.

Nyko and Felia exchanged a knowing look.

“What?” Clarke sat forward, anxious. “What’s happening to me?”

“Nothing, strikon,” Felia soothed. “You can’t smell us because you can only smell you. We all can.”

Clarke frowned in confusion.

“An omega’s longing is a powerful thing here,” Felia said, tapping on the beige layers of fabric over her heart. “And also here.” She touched her nose.

With a wave of understanding, Clarke wanted to sink under the table and disappear. Since she’d arrived that afternoon, she hadn’t given a single thought to regulating the pheromones she was pumping out—not when her entire focus was Lexa. She couldn’t smell Felia because she, Clarke, had painted the house in her own feelings. She could only imagine how her misery and fear and pain and joy must be clogging her hosts’ noses.

“Oh my god,” she groaned, pressing her fingertips to her clenched eyelids.

“It’s a good thing,” Felia said firmly. She stood up to stoke the fire with the same poker Clarke had once planned to snatch up as a weapon against the nosy village guards. “How do you think we kept the gona from smelling the alpha here? You hid her, Skayon.”
Clarke’s cheeks burned all the same. Every Ark lecture on manners she’d ever heard swirled in her mind, all in her mother’s sharp voice. “Oh my god. I’m sorry.”

Felie craned her neck to look at Nyko, obviously amused. “Are all Skaikru this delicate?”

The healer gave a half-smile. “These two less than most.”

There was an air of cautious optimism in the small room, and Clarke wondered how long it had been since Nyko and Felie had done anything but sit at Lexa’s bedside, hunched in ever-growing terror. If it eased their burden to tease her, she would let them.

Another question occurred to her. “How have you kept people away? Before me, I mean.”

“Being an old widow does have some advantages,” Felie said with a sad smile. She bent to stir the heavy pot she was heating over the fire, full of fresh bandages and linens for Lexa’s bed. In a second pot on the floor, the roots Nyko had gathered were waiting to be turned into a salve to ease her breathing. “Lexa sent warriors here to guard me, after…” She cleared her throat. “They were posted at my door so long, I suppose the neighbors got used to staying away.”

It was strange for Clarke to hear a Grounder use Heda’s given name, even if she technically wasn’t Heda anymore. “How do you explain Nyko? Why would a healer from Polis be staying here?”

“I don’t explain,” Felie said. She straightened up, and the shadow of grief faded. “I let them see. A kiss here, a caress there.” She winked. “Let them invent their own reasons why I keep a beta man in my house.”

“Oh.” Clarke flushed at the implication, even if it was just a ruse. Felie chuckled.

Nyko took pity on her and changed the subject. “I never believed my deception in Polis would last this long,” he said. “I thought surely someone would look under Heda’s shroud before the cremation. I had hoped for a day’s head start at the most.” He shook his head, as though unsure whether he felt relieved or frustrated that it had taken so long for someone to find him.

“Who was she?” Clarke asked suddenly. “The woman in the shroud?”

“A patient.” Nyko looked down into his bowl. “An alpha warrior with a similar build who was injured in the Dead Zone. She would not have lasted the season.”

Clarke nodded, the truth settling in her gut.

_We must look into the eyes of our warriors and say, “Go die for me,”_ Lexa had once told her. She wondered if the commander had ever guessed it would happen like this.

“Don’t tell her,” Clarke said quietly. “If you can avoid it, just… don’t mention it, okay?”

Nyko inclined his head.

Hundreds had died at the Mountain so that Clarke and her people might live. Seven had died in the Conclave—and thousands on the battlefield—so that Lexa might. They each carried the weight of enough souls already.

As soon as Clarke’s spoon scraped the bottom of her bowl, she stood. It had only been a few minutes since she’d left Lexa’s bedside, but those minutes already felt longer than all the days Lexa had been dead. Her skin itched to be close to the alpha’s again, and her heart ached to do something—anything—to ease her suffering.
She reached across the table for an old tin mug, which she’d asked Felia to fill with two fingers of warm water. Using the back of her knife, she scraped every trace of pink powder from the rock into the water.

Nyko stared at the amoxicillin concoction as Clarke stirred it. “Can you inject it?” he asked hopefully.

She shook her head. “Not like this.” Even if she could dissolve the antibiotic enough to pump it through a makeshift IV, this was hardly a sterile environment. She couldn’t risk putting river water into Lexa’s veins, not even if they boiled it a thousand times.

“So you hope she will drink it,” Felia said, worried. “Will there be enough if she coughs it up?”

Clarke bit her lip. “No.”

The pill swirling in the mug was one of twelve that her mother had sent along in her supply bag, but standard dosing on the Ark called for three pills a day for at least ten days. Even if the alpha swallowed every fleck of every pill Clarke had, it still might not be enough to cure her pneumonia. Besides, choking on liquid poured down her throat was how Lexa had gotten sick in the first place.

“But I have an idea.”

In Lexa’s room, as she had come to think of it, Clarke set to preparing her tools. She used her makeshift scalpel to remove the needle from the blood transfusion tube her mother had packed for her, then carefully shaved smooth the rim of tube left behind.

Nyko had followed her in from the main room. He knelt next to Clarke beside Lexa’s straw mattress, studying each move she made.

Every few seconds, Clarke’s eyes flicked up from her work to drink in Lexa’s face. The alpha was out cold again, and she found herself missing the hacking cough whose sound had cut deep into her bones. At least when Lexa was coughing, Clarke knew she was in there somewhere—suppressed by her illness, yes, but hovering close to the surface. Now, only the sweat on her brow and the shallow rise and fall of her chest suggested she was even still alive at all.

Then again, unconsciousness was going to make this easier for both of them.

“Can you tilt her up?” Clarke asked Nyko.

The beta shifted to the end of the bed. He slid his knees under Lexa’s bare shoulders, cradling her head in his lap.

Carefully, Clarke shifted onto the mattress and lifted one knee over Lexa’s middle. She hovered just above the commander’s stomach, thighs trembling with the effort of keeping her upright. Her body, unaware of Lexa’s delicate state, howled at her to fall forward until every inch of them was pressed together.

Nyko was careful not to disturb the sheet that had been drawn back over the alpha’s chest, and for that Clarke was grateful. She knew Grounders were unashamed of their bodies, and that the commander had more reason than most to be proud. It wasn’t Lexa’s modesty she was worried about
—it was her own ability to focus on the task at hand, should the body beneath her be suddenly bared.

She cleared her throat, praying her pheromones would behave. “Okay,” she murmured. Then, more loudly, toward the door that led to the other room: “Okay. Almost ready."

A moment later, Felia backed into the room, shielding the mug of amoxicillin she carried from the thick reeds that formed the door. When she turned around and saw Clarke straddling Lexa, her eyebrows shot up.

“I have to get a good angle,” Clarke said too quickly, heat rising in her cheeks.

Felia averted her eyes. “I said nothing.” Her voice was mild and unruffled, which only made Clarke’s blush deepen.

She turned her attention to working the kinks out of the plastic tube in her hands, thankful for anything to focus on besides her own embarrassment.

“Okay,” she said once more—this time to Lexa herself.

Clarke crouched down close to the commander’s chin. With unsteady hands, she began to feed the smoothed end of the tube into one of Lexa’s nostrils. On the Ark she would have used a scope to find her way, but here she had only instinct and what little she remembered from watching her mother in the Medical Bay. She held her breath, but the tube met no resistance as it snaked through the commander’s nose.

“Can you open her mouth?”

With gentle thumbs on Lexa’s jaw, Nyko did. The hut was growing dim as the day departed, but Clarke could just make out the shiny plastic tube as it disappeared down the back of Lexa’s throat.

“Good.” Clarke wiped at her brow, which had become as clammy as Lexa’s. “Now tilt her head forward a little. Yeah.”

She winced to think of how mortified the proud alpha would be if she could see herself being handled this way. Weakness, Lexa would call it. But in that moment, Clarke could imagine nothing better than seeing the commander’s cheeks pinken in embarrassment as she heard about the weeks she had been unconscious.

Had been—past tense.

Clarke rubbed Lexa’s neck as she threaded the feeding tube down her throat. It was the best way she could think of to ensure it went down Lexa’s esophagus and not her windpipe, but it was hardly foolproof. If the tube ended up in her lungs, anything Clarke poured through it would drown her. But if she didn’t try, Lexa would die anyway—from starvation as surely as from the pneumonia.

“Now what?” Nyko asked.

Clarke drew a shaky breath. “Now the medicine.”

On another day, with another patient, she would have taken the time to explain what she was doing to the Trikru healer. But this wasn’t just a patient—it was Lexa. And Clarke was hardly a teacher. She wasn’t even a real doctor. She could only imagine how appalled her mother would be if Abby could see her quivering hands and amateurish technique.

Her mom would show Nyko the right way to do it, she decided. When Lexa was well, they would
all work together to help their people. Until then, Clarke maintained a silent focus as she removed the syringe that had been jury-rigged into the far end of the transfusion tube. She dipped the detached syringe into the mug of amoxicillin Felia had set down beside her, then drew out the plunger. When it was full of pink-tinted water, she wedged the tip back into the tube.

“Take this,” she said, handing the syringe gingerly to Nyko. “I’m going to listen to her lungs, and you push in the black end. Slowly.”

As she bent down to press her ear to Lexa’s chest, Clarke closed her eyes. It wouldn’t keep Nyko and Felia from smelling the mortifying way her pheromones flared at having her body pressed to Lexa’s, but at least it would keep her from having to see their faces when they did.

Milliliter by milliliter, Nyko began to push the amoxicillin through the feeding tube. Clarke listened to the wet crackle of infection in the alpha’s chest, waiting for any bubble or pop that seemed out of the ordinary. Any wheeze that would suggest the antibiotics were dribbling into her lungs. Any sound at all that would mean Clarke was killing Lexa instead of saving her.

She listened and listened and listened, but she heard nothing.

She sat back on Lexa’s hips, the air rushing from her own lungs in a heavy sigh.

“Okay.”

While the first dose of antibiotics did its work in Lexa’s system, Felia went to cook more of the thin broth she had been dribbling into the alpha’s mouth each day. Clarke suspected it didn’t take two to boil river otter bones in salty water, but Nyko, too, followed Felia out to the main room with a quick squeeze to Clarke’s shoulder. He returned a while later with a bowl of warm broth, but he didn’t linger to watch her push it through the feeding tube.

He and Felia were trying to give her privacy, she knew. And for the thousandth time that day, she wondered what she could ever do to thank them for all they had done. For all they had given back to her.

“You’ll have to help me figure it out,” she told Lexa.

Her heart swelled at the thought that the commander would ever do something—anything—ever again. The longer she breathed in Lexa’s powerful alpha scent, the less like a mad fantasy it seemed.

“We can go to the market in Polis and look for a gift,” she murmured, stroking Lexa’s too-warm forearm. She had shifted to sit beside the mattress once the feeding tube was in place, but she couldn’t seem to keep her hands to herself for longer than a second or two. “Like we were going to before the Mountain. Remember? When everything is okay again, we’ll go.”

Lexa didn’t respond, but Clarke kept talking. She told her about the coming springtime, and the rabbits she had seen in the woods, and how much better she’d gotten at riding. As she talked, she emptied the bowl of broth one syringe-full at a time. When the broth was gone, she took Lexa’s hands and gently rotated her wrists. She bent her elbows back and forth, then lifted her shoulders this way and that. The commander’s muscles had already become less toned as her body searched for sustenance in its own tissues, and Clarke wasn’t going to let them waste away from stillness, too.
The motions were for her as much as they were for Lexa. It calmed her frayed nerves to feel Lexa’s living flesh under her hands. It comforted her to bend Lexa’s stiff knees and know they were connected to muscles that still flexed, and veins that still pulsed, and a heart that still beat—and all of it connected to a mind and soul Clarke loved.

A mind and soul she would meet again. In this life.

When it became almost too dark to see, Costia’s mother ducked back into the room with her hand cupped around a candle. She set it on the floor next to Clarke, then slowly lowered herself down beside it.

“Nyko went to sleep,” Felia whispered, as if Lexa were in danger of being awoken. She leaned forward to brush a strand of hair back from the commander’s forehead.

Clarke nodded. She knew the beta healer must have been exhausted. They all were. And yet she couldn’t imagine going to bed herself. She couldn’t imagine ever closing her eyes again—not as long as she could sit up and watch Lexa breathe.

But as she and Felia sat side by side, something occurred to Clarke.

She had come to think of this as Lexa’s room, but it wasn’t. Maybe it was Felia’s own bedroom, or maybe… maybe it was Costia’s.

The thought made Clarke’s stomach clench with guilt. Guilt that she was here, and Costia wasn’t. Guilt that Lexa cared for her. Guilt that she was the one Lexa had called for, half-delirious from blood loss. Guilt that her presence here must remind Felia of everything she had lost.

Clarke swallowed. No power in the world could make her leave this hut, but…

“I should go sleep with Octavia,” she forced out. She tried to make herself start standing, but her legs felt as though they’d melded with the floor.

“Hm?” Felia glanced up from stroking Lexa’s cheek. “Don’t be silly, goufa. You will sleep here. It will help her heal.”

Clarke’s shoulders dropped, releasing the tension that had made them creep toward her ears. “Are you sure?”

“You would argue with me in my own home?” The corner of Felia’s mouth quirked up. “I will sleep by the little omega. Someone should keep an eye on her anyhow.”

Clarke looked away before Felia could catch the grateful glassiness in her eyes. “Thank you,” she said hoarsely.

They sat together for several silent minutes, watching Lexa.

When she trusted her voice again, Clarke finally let slip the question that had been gnawing at her for hours—too petty to speak aloud, but too insidious to forget. “What you told the warriors who came to the door,” she began haltingly. “Was it—? Do I—?” She licked her lips, frustrated with her own anxiety.

_It doesn’t matter_, she told herself. _Even if the answer is yes, it doesn’t matter._

She cleared her throat, then willed the words to come out even and strong. “Do I really look like Costia?”
Clarke didn’t know what kind of reaction she’d expected from Felia, but it wasn’t a huff of laughter. “Oh, no. No.” When she caught sight of Clarke’s rattled face in the candlelight, she tamped her amusement down to a warm smile. “Not at all, goufa. Not a bit. But young alpha gonä wouldn’t remember that, would they? And even if they did, who would dare call a grieving mother a liar?” Felia’s smile faltered then, and Clarke knew the grief wasn’t part of the lie.

Clarke shifted her weight on the floor, feeling childish. Felia had been manipulating the village guards to keep Lexa safe, and Clarke had fallen for it as easily as the brash teenage alphas. “Right. Of course.”

Felia reached over and squeezed her hand. “Wait here a moment.”

She slipped from the room. When she returned a minute later, she carried a wooden box the size of a walkie-talkie. From its rough shape and improvised hinges, it was crafted after the bombs fell.

“I tried to teach Costia to carve once,” Felia said, sinking back down. She set the box between them with a conspiratorial smile. “She wasn’t very good, was she?”

Clarke started to laugh—only to choke herself off, wide-eyed, as she realized what she’d done. But Felia only smiled wider. “Open it.”

Clarke unhooked the box’s lopsided wooden latch and tipped back the lid. Inside was a small roll of paper, or something like it. Its yellowed edges looked as if a sharp breeze might crumble them. Though Felia gave her an encouraging nudge, Clarke didn’t dare reach out to touch it.

“Here,” Felia said. She lifted the brittle paper from the box with ginger fingers. As she unrolled it one inch at a time, flecks fell from the edges. An old crease down the middle looked like it might split at any moment.

When the roll of paper was finally close to flat, a laughing face peered up at Clarke. The girl in the picture was was young, vibrant, lovely—alive in fading pencil strokes, if nowhere else.

“She was beautiful,” Clarke whispered.

“She was.” Felia smiled down at her daughter’s face, her eyes watery. “And so are you, strikon. But different.”

With the evidence staring up at her, Clarke had no choice but to believe. Costia’s face was narrow where hers was full. Her eyebrows were soft where Clarke’s arched. Her lips turned up where Clarke’s turned down. And her hair and skin were dark, even in charcoal, where Clarke’s were light.

Despite Clarke’s shame at being worried about such things in the first place, relief trickled through her. Lexa cared about her because of her, not because she saw a ghost in Clarke’s face.

“It was sketched for Heda in the marketplace in Polis,” Felia said, tracing the bridge of Costia’s nose. “Lexa gave it to me, when…” Her voice faded away.

This time it was Clarke who squeezed Felia’s hand.

“Well,” the woman said, interrupting herself with a forced smile. “I try to memorize it now. Market sketches aren’t meant to last. Not much is, is it?”

She stood up then, box and drawing in hand, and Clarke knew it was to hide the tears that had begun to fall. She leaned down to give Clarke’s shoulders a quick, tight hug.
“She would be glad about you, you know,” she whispered roughly, her cheek pressed to the top of Clarke’s head. “If she knew, I think she would be glad.”

Clarke’s eyes stung. “Felia, I—”

The older woman straightened up, wiping surreptitiously at her cheek as she hurried to the bedroom door. “Here. Something to wash up, if you like,” she managed to say. She gestured at a pile of furs in the corner, where sat a neat stack of clothes and a jug of water that she must have set down when she walked in.

“Thank you. I—”

“Goodnight, then, goufa. Blow out the candle before you sleep. Sweet dreams to you.”

“Goodnight,” Clarke echoed softly. But Felia was already gone.

Slowly, Clarke stood up to retrieve the jug of water and the offered clothes. They smelled like Felia and earthy rosemary soap, and the warm tinge of omega that clung to them reminded her of burying her face in her dad’s pillow when she was small.

In the flickering candlelight, she unfastened the many-strapped armor that had once been some long-ago commander’s, then slipped out of the thin jacket Titus had given her. As she discarded her torn black shirt and filthy jeans, she watched Lexa. Her breath caught with every flutter of the alpha’s eyes, but they never opened.

Still, Clarke blushed as she dipped a Grounder bandage into the water jug to use as a washcloth. She scrubbed the rough fabric over her skin, watching as streaks of dirt and dried sweat darkened and then disappeared. It wasn’t exactly a steamy Ark shower, but washing away the grime of her journey made her feel a little bit more like the unsullied young girl she’d been in a past life.

When she was clean, even she could make out the notes of her own omega scent that had been so potent to the others. She had to assume the biting odor of pain was less acute than it had been when she’d first arrived, but she suspected the scent of her longing—especially every time she looked at Lexa—was just as intense.

Clarke slipped into the two shirts Felia had left out—one a dark tank and the other a soft, drapey long-sleeve for on top. Both were worn and mottled, like everything manufactured before the bombs, but they were deliciously clean, and their stretch forgave any differences between Clarke’s shape and the older woman’s.

The loose drawstring pants Felia had left were scratchier than the shirts, but Clarke smiled faintly as she tied them around her waist. It was obvious from their coarse material and unusual shape that these were not leftovers from Old Earth, but Grounder originals. After all the horrors she had experienced, it was easy to forget that Earth wasn’t just violence and vengeance and death. It was this, too. It was tight-knit villages, and parents who chuckled at their children’s botched art projects, and someone, somewhere, who spent their days designing pants.

Clarke fished the Flame and Lexa’s gear out of her discarded jacket, only to discover she had nowhere to put them in her borrowed clothing. It seemed Grounder fashion designers had yet to implement pockets. She tucked the tin that held the Flame into her waistband instead, then instinctively squeezed the gear in her palm.

As she returned to Lexa’s side, though, her grip loosened. “I guess I can give this back to you now,” she said, blinking down at the bit of metal she had kept so close. Although the gear was a remnant of
Lexa’s position, it had belonged to Lexa, not Heda. Soon it would again.

Until then, Clarke slipped it back into her jacket pocket, then folded the jacket gently atop her jeans.

She didn’t need to cling to remnants anymore. Not when Lexa was here.

When the night air grew crisp, she retrieved a fur from the pile by the door. She would use it to keep warm until morning came, but she wouldn’t sleep. Not until Lexa woke up.

She lay down beside Lexa on the narrow cot, but only so she could make the fur cover both of them. She wedged herself against the alpha’s side, as close as she could get without crawling on top of her, but only so she would feel if Lexa’s breathing changed. And she closed her eyes, but only for a single moment.

Maybe not much was meant to last, but she had to believe this was.

Lexa was.

The next time Clarke raised her head, a bright haze of sunlight outlined the square of wood that was latched closed over the room’s single window. Sounds of movement and voices floated in from the other room. As her sleep- addled brain tried to make sense of what had happened, she saw the candle beside the mattress had burned down to a nub.

It was morning, she realized with a start. That was what had happened.

She sat up in a rush, her head jerking toward Lexa. She was petrified she would find the commander ashen and cold thanks to her neglect, but Lexa looked the same as the day before. The same, only… Better.

Eyes wide, Clarke reached out to touch Lexa’s forehead. The alpha’s fever had dropped, and some of the color had returned to her cheeks. Her pulse was less erratic, if not yet strong.

“Lexa?” Clarke asked.

She received no answer, but she brimmed with happiness as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes. A break in Lexa’s fever was reason enough to celebrate. The other pieces would fall into place in time. Lexa had opened her eyes the day before, if only for a moment, and surely—surely—she would again.

Regretfully, Clarke peeled her body away from the commander’s and hurried into the main room.

“It’s helping,” she said to Felia and Nyko, by way of greeting. “I don’t know if it’s the medicine yet or just having more to eat, but she looks more like herself.”

“Look who rises,” Felia teased. She was busy ladling a thick grain porridge into four bowls.

Clarke guessed from the sun pouring in from the smoke escape that it was already mid-morning, or maybe even later.

“Nyko pumped another bowl of broth through that tube of yours,” Felia said. It was obvious how
distasteful she found the feeding tube, necessary though it might be. “That was the right thing, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Clarke agreed, deflating a little. She was glad Felia and Nyko had given Lexa more to eat, but embarrassed she hadn’t been awake to do it herself.

“I thought we would wake you when we came in, but you were out cold. Unlike your candle,” Felia added, side-eying Clarke.

“Sorry.” Clarke suppressed the impulse to avert her eyes. She should have been up and helping. Barring that, the very least she could do to thank Felia for saving Lexa’s life was make sure her house didn’t burn down.

“You won’t apologize for taking care of yourself,” Felia said, as if omegas on the Ark weren’t taught to do just that their entire lives. “What you will do is sit and eat, and then you will talk your friend out of her madness.”

Confused, Clarke stepped further into the room. She soon saw Octavia was awake, too. Her friend sat on the floor behind Nyko, who was perched on a stool at the table. “Octavia,” Clarke said, relieved to see the other omega up and about—sort of. “Are you feeling better?”

Octavia was tugging on her boots. She seemed single-minded in her lacing, but her fingers fumbled with every hole. “Sure,” she said gruffly.

“She promised to wait until you woke to leave for Polis, but not a moment longer,” Felia said.

“Oh, good. Listen, O, when you get there, I need you to tell Indra that Lexa—”

“Hod op,” Felia interrupted, punctuating each word with a wave of her goopy spoon. “This girl is hardly fit to get on a horse, never mind ride all day to the capital. No. There is no question.”

“But—”

“I’m fine,” Octavia said. It was obvious from her dismissive tone that she’d already had this argument with Felia more than once this morning.

“We can send someone else to tell Indra about Heda,” Nyko offered.

Clarke opened her mouth to tell him there was no one else they could trust to know Lexa was alive, but Octavia beat her to it.

“Yeah, ’cause that worked out so great last time,” said the young omega, rolling her eyes.

“Then Indra can wait,” Felia snapped. She looked to Octavia. “I told you, goufa, if the mate sickness doesn’t kill you, fainting and falling off your horse surely will. You’re skin and bones, worse than Clarke.”

Clarke was about to dive headlong into an impassioned argument about why word had to reach Indra right this second, but Felia’s words stopped her short. As they broke through her stubborn focus, she sank down onto the nearest stool.

“Mate sickness,” she echoed dumbly. They called it something else on the Ark—something Latin-based and multisyllabic—but it wasn’t difficult to guess what Felia meant. “Octavia has mate sickness,” she said again, stunned by her own obliviousness.
“Well, did you think she’d stopped eating for her own amusement?” Felia tsked.

“I…” The truth was, Clarke hadn’t really given proper thought to Octavia’s wellbeing in the first place—not after those first few days, when she’d been worried the other omega might not make it to their next destination. Not when finding Lexa had consumed her every conscious thought.

“I’m fine,” Octavia said.

“Isn’t it too soon?” Clarke glanced from Felia to Nyko, struggling to make sense of it all.

On the Ark, mating—and thus mate sickness—was rare. Her mother had shooed her away from the handful of cases that had come into the Medical Bay, deeming them too adult for an innocent young omega. Clarke had only a vague understanding of the physiological processes underlying the torment that resulted from being separated from one’s mate, but she did know they were supposed to take months to set in.

“Sha,” Felia said. “It comes faster and stronger for omegas than alphas, though usually not until two or three heats spent alone.” She shook her head. “But sometimes it happens this way. Especially if…” She trailed off, busying herself by the fire. “Well, we’ll see.”

Nyko cleared his throat, then looked at Clarke. “I am not sure you know the full effects, Wanheda. Doctor Griffin told me of the medicines you call suppressants, and that only your omegas are mate-marked. If this is so, and if all omegas took these medicines…” He held out his hands, palms up.

Clarke understood what Nyko was getting at. Mate sickness only affected a spouse who’d been bitten, and on the Ark that was almost always the omega—and only the omega. Ark alphas wanted their mates bound to them, but they didn’t want to be bound to anyone in return. When her omega father had died, her alpha mother mourned—Clarke was sure of it, despite everything that had happened. But Abby hadn’t suffered. Not the way she would have if she’d borne Jake’s bite. Not the way Jake would have if she had died first.

Clarke had never seen anyone with mate sickness who wasn’t an omega, and that meant she had never seen anyone with mate sickness who wasn’t on suppressants.

With suppressants, mate sickness was a crushing cocktail of chemical depression and withdrawal symptoms. She was afraid to ask what mate sickness without suppressants could possibly be like, but she did anyway.

Felia was the one who answered. “Here the sickness means death as often as not.”

Clarke’s jaw hung open. “Death?”

“Mated bodies become dependent, and even more so when the bond is mutual. After a time, the blood aches for a fresh bite. The nose stings for the mate’s scent. These are normal needs, easily met,” Felia said, waving her hand. “But if the mate is dead, the body yearns and yearns and never receives. In time it feels no hunger but that one. No need to eat, or sleep, or go into the sun. It wastes away.”

“But you lost a mate. You said so. Costia’s sire,” Clarke argued, glancing at the faded scar on Felia’s neck. She wanted the woman to tell her there was something here she was missing—some secret solution that would make all of this okay.

“Yes,” Felia agreed. “And I lay for weeks in the bed where Heda lies now. If it hadn’t been for my little one, I would not have gotten up.”
Clarke’s stomach felt like it had sunk straight down to the floor. Any appetite she might have had for the pot of porridge on the table vanished. How could she have let Octavia come along with her all these days? How had she not realized something was really, really wrong? How much damage had she done to her friend without knowing it?

And now that she knew, how much more would she still be forced to do?

“Now you see,” Felia said severely.

Clarke nodded, feeling sick with guilt.

“So you make her listen. She stays here, where she is safe. We will give you two a moment.” Felia picked up two bowls and two spoons, jerking her head at Nyko. He rose, and together they went to take their breakfast with the sleeping commander. Felia shot Clarke one last meaningful glance before she disappeared through the reeds.

Clarke turned her gaze toward the ceiling, asking the sky above for wisdom—forgiveness—anything at all. Instead, she saw Costia’s wooden box. It sat on the highest shelf in the room, nestled beside a curved, rusty sword. Felia must have decided to leave the drawing out, or maybe she’d been too afraid to roll it back up. Either way, Costia’s crumbling face smiled down at her.

She wondered whether Felia’s daughter would still be glad about her now.

Octavia had been studiously ignoring their companions, but now she looked straight at Clarke. “Don’t worry,” she said flatly. “I’m still going.”

Clarke stood up. She opened her mouth, then closed it again. Her stomach clenched. “I don’t want to ask you to do this.”

Only she didn’t have a choice. If Polis slipped from Indra’s grip, they could have a civil war on their hands in a matter of days. And that might be too much for even Lexa to thwart—at least, not without months of battle and diplomacy. Lexa didn’t have that kind of strength, and Clarke didn’t have that kind of time. If any of them were going to live through the nuclear meltdown—including Octavia—then they had to hold the Coalition together long enough to stop it.

Octavia snapped her boot laces tight. “You’re not asking. I’m telling.”

Clarke knew the semantics wouldn’t absolve her of responsibility if Felia was right and something terrible happened to Octavia on the road. It wouldn’t help her sleep at night if the other omega never made it back to Burou. But this was bigger than Clarke’s feelings. It was bigger than either of them. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Octavia shrugged. “I’m not. For once I’m going to bring good news to the Trikru.”

“Just to Indra,” Clarke said forcefully. She glanced the way Felia and Nyko had gone, then lowered her voice. “O, you can’t tell anyone else.” If an enterprising clan leader heard the commander was alive and decided to make sure the antlered throne remained vacant, Lexa was a sitting duck.

“Like I’d spill to some branwada and let them steal my thunder. Please.” Octavia managed a faint smirk as she stood. “This is my news for Indra.”

“What about the horses?” Clarke wrung her hands.

“I saw where the guards took them. I’ll figure something out.”
Clarke drew a long breath. “Are you sure you can make it, O?”

Octavia snorted as she picked up her jacket from beside the fire, but her eyes were glassy and unfocused.

“But… be careful.” Clarke prayed she was doing the right thing. “And promise me you’ll go see my mom. See if she has any suppressants left. And… more antibiotics, too,” she added, ashamed that her reasons for sending Octavia to Abby weren’t entirely selfless.

Octavia didn’t even seem to notice. “Uh-huh.”

“If you can find Kane, ask him how much longer we have. He won’t want to estimate, but you have to make him.” Clarke bit her tongue to keep herself from asking Octavia to go ahead and manage the whole Coalition while she was at it. “I’ll see you soon, okay?”

“Sure. Yeah.” Octavia opened the front door. She was about to step off the hut’s platform when she paused to glance back. “And Griffin?”

Clarke stood straighter.

Octavia’s eyes were haunted, but her lips twitched up. “We did it.”

Costia’s mother didn’t speak to Clarke for the rest of the day. She ladled a second helping of breakfast porridge into Clarke’s bowl and set a heaping plate of fish before her for lunch, but the only sounds she made were pained sighs. It made Clarke ache to know she had betrayed the fledgling trust Felia had placed in her, and she quietly accepted her punishment for putting Octavia at risk. She soothed herself with the thought that Lexa would understand why she had done it. Felia might have spent time in the capital and grown close to the commander through her daughter, but that didn’t mean she understood the impossible choices a leader had to make. But Lexa did.

Lexa would, just as soon as she woke up.

Clarke spent the afternoon pushing broth and antibiotics through the feeding tube in Lexa’s nose, then rubbing the minty salve Nyko had concocted into the skin over her breastbone. When Lexa’s chest was green and sticky from shoulder to shoulder, Clarke helped Felia formulate the gruel that would be the next step in the alpha’s recovery. They had to get the consistency exactly right to keep it from clogging the feeding tube, but Felia’s silence made cooking together difficult.

With every heap of pulverized grain Clarke spooned into the pot, her mother’s starving patients in Polis plagued her. The ones who had started eating too quickly—who ate too much that was too rich too soon—had been dying just as surely as if they’d never gotten to eat at all. Clarke had to be careful to keep Lexa’s calorie intake low for these first few days, no matter how she longed to literally pump strength back into the commander.

While the first batch of gruel was simmering, a thick cough came from Lexa’s room. Clarke dropped her mixing spoon and darted across the hut, Nyko close on her heels.

“Lexa?” Clarke gasped, bursting through the reeds.

Lexa coughed again and again, but her eyes did not open.
“She is still asleep,” Nyko said, his voice low with sympathy.

Clarke bit back a sharp retort about how she could see that for herself. She felt sore with disappointment, but that was hardly Nyko’s fault.

“Another layer of salve,” the healer said.

Clarke nodded. Ever intuitive, Nyko handed her the bowl of green paste and bowed out of the room.

She set to work with trembling hands, smoothing Nyko’s the healer’s sticky mixture across Lexa’s chest. Her heart clenched at each of Lexa’s pained coughs. The coughing eventually faded, but her breathing remained ragged. Clarke paused to feel the thump of her heartbeat at every stroke, but it didn’t comfort her the way it had the day before.

With Nyko gone, it was harder to fill the stillness of the sickroom with busy work and hopeful words. Without Felia’s even reassurances, it was harder to ignore the way the commander’s lungs still struggled to draw air. And even though Lexa was here with her, it was impossible not to feel alone.

When the silence and worry began to press in on her, Clarke spoke to Lexa’s closed eyes. “The medicine is working. You’re getting better. You have to keep fighting a little longer, that’s all.” Her throat felt tight. “You just have to wake up, okay?”

With each trembling word, she was reminded of how supremely lucky she was to get to worry over Lexa at all. She thought of the empty huts in Tondc, and Lincoln lying prone in the grass, and the disintegrating drawing on the shelf. For so many of her friends and loved ones, the time for worry was long past.

Clarke’s cheeks were suddenly damp, and she wiped roughly at them. She would be of no use to anyone if she couldn’t keep herself together—not to Felia, not to Octavia, and certainly not to Lexa.

She drew a steadying breath, then reached for the tan leather satchel she’d brought from Polis. She rummaged past the scalpel, the gauzy white bandages, and the empty packets of antibiotics. It was the old first aid manual she wanted, the one Indra had turned into a map. Next she fished out the Skaikru pen, fine tipped and full of dark ink. Even on the Ark, such an item would have been a luxury. For her mother in the healer’s hut, it must have seemed a useless relic of technologies and resources she would probably never see again.

Clarke began to sketch in the empty margins of the first aid manual, one eye always on Lexa. She worked from memory, curving her strokes around wide eyes and smiling lips. Drawing was a small comfort compared to the size of the fear in her heart, but the challenge of working with a new implement provided just enough distraction to keep her eyes dry. It didn’t drain the sea of worries that threatened drag her under, but it helped her keep afloat.

When she was satisfied with her initial sketches, she dragged the satchel into her lap. She made an experimental mark on the leather, then tried to rub it off with her thumb. It didn’t budge. She dumped out the bag and pressed it flat on the floor, examining one side and then the other. The front was stained and rumpled from years of abuse, but the other side—the one generations of Grounders had worn against their backs—was weathered but smooth.

She picked the scalpel from the pile of discarded supplies and used it to saw the good stretch of leather away from the rest of the bag. She trimmed its edges into a rectangle the size of her mother’s old medical tablet, then sat back to consider her handiwork. It was hardly a gallery canvas, but that wasn’t what she needed. She just needed something that would last.
Clarke leaned close against Lexa’s mattress, then put her pen to the leather.

*Wake up*, she begged the alpha, as she marked the rough outline of her subject.

*Wake up*, as day turned to night and Nyko and Felia retired.

*Wake up*, as a new candle burned down to the floor.

And as the sun rose, Lexa did.

Chapter End Notes

*Sha, goufa* - yes, child
*Strikon* - little one
*Skayon* - Sky Person
*Gona* - warrior(s)
*Hod op* - wait
*Sha* - yes
*Branwada* - fool
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Heda returns.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Pain.

For some time, that was all she could grasp.

It did not concern her. The Commander of the Twelve Clans knew pain. She was accustomed to injury. She knew how to wake up in agony and rise to do her duty anyway.

The problem was, Lexa could not rise. She could not move. She could not see. And she could not think for longer than a fleeting moment before her consciousness slipped back into the abyss.

There was nothing in the darkness. No time, and no self—until little by little, light began to creep in.

Was this what it meant to be passed to the next vessel? Was she the Spirit now? Was she the Flame? Was she—in the most base possible sense?

In time, Lexa came to notice that her pain had a shape. It beat out from her middle like a war drum—more disconcerting than deadly, yet impossible to ignore. And if the pain had a shape, she knew, then so, too, must she.

As her senses slowly came to life, she discovered it was not the pain that kept her from rising. It was a weight on her chest. Something soft, heavy, and shaking. No, not shaking.

Sobbing.

Lexa dragged in a raspy breath, and her chest filled with intoxicating warmth. She did not know where she was—she did not know who she was—but she knew that scent. She would know it anywhere. It was the one that had wrenched her to her knees time and again, like a yoke around her heart.

She opened her lips to speak, but her mouth felt like the sands of the Dead Zone. She tried again, and again, until finally, just above a whisper—

“Klark.”

The sobbing got louder, but the weight on her chest lifted. Lexa searched inside herself for every scrap of strength, and she found just enough to open her eyes.

*Klark kom Skaikru* hovered above her, gripping her shoulders. She was crying, but she wore a smile more brilliant than any Lexa had seen.

“Hi,” Clarke choked out, as much a laugh as a sob.
Lexa drew another unsteady breath. She had recognized Clarke’s scent, but it was different than she remembered. The girl beaming down at her didn’t smell like terror and despair, or the singeing smoke of a fayagon. She smelled like joy.

Disoriented, Lexa looked down. Her body was covered in a linen sheet, but she didn’t need to see its contours to know that it was not Aden’s, or some other Nightblood’s. It was her own.

“What—?” she managed to rasp, only to launch herself into a violent coughing fit. Her lungs felt as though fire had eaten them from the inside out. No matter how she breathed or how much wetness leaked from her eyes, she couldn’t seem to make them settle.

“Shh, shh,” Clarke soothed. Her hands were on Lexa’s face. “Don’t try to talk.” She called over her shoulder, “Water! Can somebody bring some water?”

Lexa struggled to turn her head in the direction Clarke had shouted, and then to focus her eyes beyond the omega crouched at her side. The second she did, vertigo overcame her.

She was too low to the ground to be lying in her bed. Over Clarke’s shoulder were not the dark walls of Heda’s quarters, but a blur of light wood and river reeds that hovered somewhere between memory and reality. Sunlight seeped in around a closed window, and she knew it wasn’t evening, as she recalled, but morning.

Clarke seemed to sense her rising anxiety. “It’s okay,” she said. Her voice shook with emotion. “I promise, everything is okay now.”

Lexa blinked up into watery blue eyes and struggled to understand. The gash on Clarke’s forehead—the one that had made silent rage boil in her gut when she first saw it—had vanished. A thin scar was there instead.

Over a fresh blaze of coughing, Lexa heard the distinctive crinkle of rustling reeds. It reminded her of carefree autumns, then hollow loss. Before she could discern the source of the sound, Clarke leaned forward and filled her vision.

A metal cup was pressed to Lexa’s lips. The cool water tempered the fire in her throat—but as the burning faded, so did she.

The next time Lexa woke, her mind was clearer.

She remembered the sound that had sent her sprinting down the tower hallway toward Clarke. She remembered the acrid stench of a smoking gun, and the person who had been holding it. She remembered the horror in Titus’s eyes when he realized what he had done. She remembered lying in her bed, and hot liquid pouring from her body, and Clarke’s voice.

And then… nothing.

Time had passed, she realized. Time had healed Clarke’s wound. It had turned the gush of blood in her stomach into the thrumming pain she felt now. And it had brought them both here—wherever here was.

“Lexa?” Clarke was still crouched at her side, nearly vibrating with worry. Despite her healed cut,
she looked as if she had run headlong into a storm and barely come out alive.

“You did it,” Lexa said. Her voice was hoarse, and her eyelids drifted open and closed without her permission, but her lips twitched up with pride. One day, she would learn to stop underestimating the Sky healer. “You said you would fix me, and you did.”

Clarke’s eyes skirted from Lexa’s face to her abdomen. There was shame in them. “I didn’t,” she admitted. “They did.”

Shadows moved behind Clarke, and suddenly Lexa realized they were not alone. It disoriented her more than debilitating pain—more than waking in a strange place—more than lost time.

A low, involuntary warning growl rumbled in her chest.

She, Heda, should have known someone else was here. She should have smelled them coming a hundred yards off. An entire civilization relied on the sharpness of her instincts, yet her senses were so dulled that she had let strangers get within striking distance of the omega pressed to her hip.

The moment the shadows got close enough to turn into people, the instinctive alpha posturing left Lexa in a rush.

These were not, in fact, strangers. And these walls, their smells and sounds… as her gaze flicked past the face above her, she realized she knew them, too.

“Felia?” she croaked, disbelieving.

Lexa had visited this hut only a handful of times before, years ago, on the rare occasions her war party had strayed close enough to the riverside village to make a detour. The first time she had come, she’d been a rash fifteen-year-old here to declare her foolhardy intentions toward a girl she had just begun to know. The last time, she’d come to deliver a final gift to the only person alive whose grief had run as deep as her own. She had not seen Costia’s mother since.

Felia smiled down at her, still in her nightclothes. There were tears in her dark eyes. “Sha, strikon. No need to make a ruckus.”

Heat prickled Lexa’s chest, but a grin tugged at her chapped lips. Whenever she had loitered near Felia’s market stall as a young novitiate in Polis, the woman had liked to tease her for her brutish alpha ways. It had been an amusing diversion for the widowed omega while they waited for Costia to return from whatever trouble she’d gotten into, and taking the teasing in stride had been an opportunity for Lexa to prove herself an even and worthy mate. Years later, she thanked those soft gibes for her disciplined temper as much as she credited Anya and Titus’s harsh lessons.

The house in Burou smelled different than it had in those years. Even that last time, when Lexa arrived with a tear-stained sketch of Costia and two warriors to leave behind, her love’s sunshine scent had lingered.

Not so now. Now Clarke’s sweetness filled her senses, dull and sluggish as they were. Lexa took a deep, ragged breath of her, and some of the pain eased.

Felia stepped closer, resting a motherly hand on Clarke’s shoulder. “We were worried about you.”

In turn, Clarke gripped Lexa’s hand hard enough to crumble bone. Her hair was tussled and she wore loose Trikru sleeping pants, but she looked as if she hadn’t shut her eyes in weeks. “Yeah,” she said, a tremor in her voice.
We wasn’t only the two omegas, Lexa soon saw. The Woods Clan healer, Nyko, stood further back. He bowed his head with respect, then came forward to squat beside Clarke. “Mounin hou, Heda,” he greeted quietly. He reached for the pulse point on her neck, but Lexa jerked away with a snarl.

*How dare he?* roared the alpha inside her. How dare this beta—her *subject*—presume to touch her this way?

Nyko’s hand snapped back, and he showed his throat. Felia tilted her chin with a frown.

*Good,* the alpha raged.

Then she realized that Clarke, too, had flinched. Her reason returned in a rush. She clenched her eyes shut as she sagged back into place on the mattress. “I apologize,” she whispered, shame thick in her voice.

The three people before her were obviously the reason she was still alive after Titus’s betrayal. It was not their fault she lay prone in this bed, foggy and weak and unworthy of her title. It was not their fault her tight reins of control had snapped. She had to get ahold of herself. She fought to draw back the domineering pheromones she’d let slip, but she could tell from the way Nyko and Felia edged away that her efforts were feeble.

Only Clarke pressed in closer. “I’ll check it, okay?” She reached for the spot on Lexa’s neck that Nyko’s fingers had grazed, looking nervous but determined.

Lexa’s insides pulsed with guilt. She wanted to turn her head and show the omega her throat, like she had done when she swore fealty. She wanted to show Clarke that she didn’t have to be afraid. That she, Lexa, was Clarke’s to touch as she pleased.

But Lexa could not. *Heda* could not. Even if the man and woman across the room had saved her life—even if she cared deeply for them both—they *were* her subjects. Between her wretched state and the loss of her temper, she had revealed too much vulnerability already. Letting the world see how weak she was for Clarke would only spell disaster for them both.

Instead, she lay stock-still and stared at the ceiling as Clarke took her pulse.

“Breathe,” the omega reminded her softly. After a long stretch of silence, Clarke turned to Nyko. “It’s stronger. A little fast, but that makes sense.”

As Clarke spoke to the healer, Lexa closed her eyes. She began to center herself the way Anya had taught her as a child. With one long breath, she felt for the boundaries of her physical body—the rush of her blood, the shape of her muscles, the edges of her skin. With another, she greeted the alpha inside her. The alpha that was her. Instead of fighting its power, she let it consume her until, as if in a barrel plunged over a waterfall, she emerged on the other side—panting and bruised, but more alive than she had been.

Finally, Lexa reached into the one part of her soul Anya had not been able to help her understand. The one part she’d had to master on her own. She beckoned the past commanders into her consciousness, welcomed their wisdom and their guidance, and asked them to lend her strength until her own returned. She reached and reached, she listened and listened, and in return she received…

Silence.

Lexa’s eyes flew open.

Clarke’s hand was still on her neck. “What’s wrong?”
She gasped for breath. “The Spirit.”

The understanding and apprehension in Clarke’s eyes told her all she needed to know.

She struggled to sit up, but pain tore through her stomach. Something slick moved at the back of her throat and tugged on her nose. Her gag quickly became a cough, then a fit of coughs, until she was wheezing for air. Clarke pushed her shoulders back as a wave of dizziness overcame her, but it was too late. The room eclipsed into darkness, until only one thought remained.

The commanders were gone.

The Spirit had left her.

She was alone.

When Lexa stirred, only Clarke remained in the room. The air smelled like anxiety, but her muddled senses couldn’t tell whose.

“What happened?” she croaked.

Clarke sat on the edge of the low mattress, her thigh pressed along Lexa’s ribs. She leaned over to fuss with whatever inhuman Ark contraption had made Lexa choke. “You fell asleep,” she said lightly. “It’s okay. It’s expected. It’ll take a while to get your strength back.”

“No.” Lexa focused all her energy, and she managed to lift her arm and catch one of the omega’s busy hands. “What happened, Clarke?”

Clarke’s shoulders sagged. She set Lexa’s hand back on the mattress, but she didn’t let go. She blinked rapidly, and several seconds passed before she could speak. “Titus shot you. He was coming for me because he thought I was going to get you killed, but you got in the way.”

Lexa remembered the fury she had felt when she heard the gunshot and saw Titus aiming at Clarke, but she bit back the growl of anger that rose up. She knew instinctively that Clarke would not continue if she believed her patient was becoming too upset.

“You—” Clarke’s voice trembled as she went on, and her eyes began to fill. “You died. Right there in my arms. Titus removed the Flame. He took your body away. And I—” She shook her head, overcome.

Lexa felt far away as Clarke struggled to recount the last day they spent together. Her death was an eventuality she had spent most of her life preparing for, but now it felt as if it had happened to someone else. To the woman she had been when she was Heda.

“How long?” Her voice echoed hollowly in her silent mind.

Clarke fought to collect herself, but her chest heaved with the tears she held back. “It’s been almost three weeks. I didn’t— I didn’t know you were—” She squeezed her eyes shut. “Everything changed. Everything was— You were dead, Lexa.”

Despite the many possible outcomes Lexa had charted for her end, Clarke Griffin’s anguish was not a variable she had planned for. The sound of it cut through the fog that surrounded her and into the
quick of her bones. With a flicker of strength, she detangled their hands and reached up to stroke Clarke’s cheek. “Shh,” she whispered. “En’s ogud nau.”

Clarke leaned into the touch, curling forward to cling to Lexa’s arm. Hot tears leaked over Lexa’s wrist and down to her elbow, until finally Clarke gained courage. She sat back, wiping at her face. “Titus”—she spat the name—“brought you to Nyko for some sort of funeral preparations, but Nyko realized you were still alive.”

“The Flamekeeper’s job is to ensure the Spirit persists. Better it leaves its vessel too soon than too late.”

A dark look crossed Clarke’s face at Lexa’s defense of her mentor, but she was focused on neither Heda nor the Spirit. “I don’t know how Nyko did it, but he saved you and brought you here. He thought someone would figure it out sooner, but it— it took me so long to realize.” Clarke looked close to crying again, and she smelled like guilt. The sour scent gnashed at Lexa’s insides as painfully as the wound in her gut. “Eventually I found some of the things Nyko used to help you in the healer’s hut. And no one had seen your body before it was— before. It just didn’t add up. I left Polis to look for you, but I couldn’t find— I didn’t know if—”

“You did find me,” Lexa said. Her voice was firm for the first time since she’d extracted her final promise from Titus. She would die a hundred times at the flamekeeper’s hand before she would allow Clarke to suffer under the delusion that this was her fault.

“Barely,” Clarke scoffed, sniffing. “And mainly thanks to Octavia.”

“Octavia,” Lexa echoed, her gaze ticking to the ceiling. The young omega who was Clarke’s friend, and the mate of a man she might have called her own, had she been born to another life. “Is Lincoln here?”

The pain that flared in Clarke’s scent answered her question. “Pike put him on his knees and shot him in the head,” she said roughly. “Octavia watched.”

Clarke’s words smarted in Lexa’s chest, but she swallowed until the pain became a dull ache. Her own grief was of little consequence when there were so much more important matters at hand.

Three weeks. It had been three weeks.

“The Flame,” she said. “Has Aden ascended?”

Clarke looked away. Her hand strayed to the waistband of her pants, then clenched into a fist. “We can talk about all of that later, okay?”

Lexa’s breath caught, and this time it was not from the fire in her lungs.

If the answer was yes, Clarke would not have hesitated.

If Aden was alive, she would not look so afraid.

“I need to know, Clarke.”

“No, you need to rest.”

“I am rested.”

“Lexa—”
“Clarke.” Her voice held just the hint of an alpha command.

Clarke shivered—then glared at her. The omega shifted off the mattress to sit cross-legged on the floor, though the loss of contact seemed to pain her. She turned and showed Lexa her back, then shot her own order over her shoulder. “Sleep.”

Despite her frustration, Lexa was left with little to do but grind her jaw. She stared up at the reed ceiling as minute after silent minute crawled by, and eventually she had to concede that Clarke was right. Three weeks of darkness, it seemed, had not been rest enough.

Against her will, Lexa’s eyes began to droop shut. She faded in and out as the stripes of light from the window bent their way across the room. Clarke was busy at her side each time she awoke, dribbling water into her mouth or pushing pink liquid through a tube that seemed to spring from her nose. Sometimes the omega spoke in tense, hushed tones with Felia; others, she discussed wound care protocols with Nyko.

Only when the room was dark did Lexa finally open her eyes to find Clarke still. She had returned to the mattress, and she clung ferociously to Lexa in her sleep.

It reminded Lexa of the day they had spent together in Polis, tangled in her bed. They had both been lighter then, happier and more hesitant, yet the same fear of loss had lingered. At least, Lexa had feared losing Clarke. She had dreaded getting out of bed, knowing it would mean sacrificing her omega to the blockade—to duty—to the obstinacy of their people and the isolation of leadership.

She could not claim to know how Clarke had felt. She didn’t even know if Clarke considered herself Lexa’s, or Lexa hers. She remembered every exquisite moment of that afternoon, but she also remembered maybe someday. She remembered the uncertainty and the old hurt in Clarke’s eyes when she had said the words. She remembered that, even now, Clarke did not trust her to know the truth of what had happened after her death.

For tonight, though, Lexa would grant herself this comfort. She would shift her body to let the omega squirm closer, and bury her nose in Clarke’s hair, and as she drifted back to sleep, she would allow herself to wonder whether her someday had come—and if her people’s had already gone.

In the morning, Lexa woke to an empty bed. It was closer to midday than to sunrise, judging by the bright light fighting its way in around the window edges, but her body seemed to have lost all sense of time.

Clarke sat on the other side of the room, hunched over a piece of hide with a pen. Nyko was perched on a low stool beneath the window, stirring a bowl of foul-smelling gruel Lexa suspected was meant for her. When the healer glanced up and saw she was awake, he opened his mouth to speak. Before he could, she held a finger to her lips.

Nyko glanced at Clarke, who was absorbed in her work, then back to Lexa. “Wanheda,” he said hesitantly. “Will you please help Felia peel the roots I collected?”

Lexa felt a stab of guilt at the speed with which Clarke rolled away her drawing and sprung up to help, even as she plotted deception. But if Clarke would not confide in her, she was left with no choice. She had to learn what had become of her people, even if they were not her people any longer. She had to hear the truth, even if Clarke feared it would break her.
When the omega was gone, Lexa crooked a silent finger at Nyko. She realized halfway through the gesture that she no longer had the right to issue such commands, and her hand fell limply to her side.

Still Nyko ambled over, a confused look on his face. “Sha, Heda?” he whispered, crouching down beside her. “Are you unwell?”

“Clearly,” she said, her voice dry. It made the stoic beta’s mouth tick up, and Lexa was glad to smell his anxiety fade—not least because it meant her nose was finally sharpening. “And don’t call me that.”

“Forgive me, Hed—” He ducked his head. “Forgive me.”

She waved a dismissive hand, then wondered how long it would take to break herself of her imperious habits—or if she ever could. For now, she was not above using Nyko’s lingering deference to her advantage. “Tell me everything,” she ordered. “What of Polis?”

Nyko turned up his palms. “I have been here with you, and Wanheda says little unless she speaks of your care.”

“But you have heard rumors in the village. You go out to collect roots, don’t you?” She cast a shrewd look at him, but it seemed to have little impact from her prone position.

The healer glanced nervously toward the reed doorway. “Wanheda thinks you should be more stable before you worry about matters of state.”

“Then Wanheda thinks I am weak,” Lexa ground out.

With a grimace, she struggled to sit up. Pain ripped through her torso and her vision blackened at the edges, but she breathed into it. She took short puffs through her nose until she sat diagonally across the mattress, one shoulder leaning against the wall and the linen sheet tucked around her chest. The movement jostled the infernal tube in her throat, which brought on a fresh bout of coughing. By the time she caught her breath, the dominant alpha pheromones she’d released had all but evaporated.

She sagged back against the wall, feeling worse than foolish. Here she was attempting to manage a coalition that was no longer hers, and she could hardly manage her own body.

Clarke was right. She was weak.

“Will you remove this, please?” She gestured feebly at her nose.

Nyko blinked with surprise, and Lexa guessed he could specifically recall each of the times he’d heard an alpha say please. The unexpected appeal had him leaning forward and pulling the tube from her nose, though she knew he was probably under strict orders from Clarke to leave it in place.

Lexa would face the omega’s wrath later. For now, she yearned to feel like herself—as much as that remained possible.

“How bad is it?” she croaked, when the tube lay on the mattress and she had recovered from another coughing fit.

The beta glanced down at her middle, and she resisted the impulse to place a protective hand over the knot of pain there. “Better than before,” he said simply. “Your lungs, also. The fever has broken. The Sky medicine is working.”

“Clarke,” she guessed.
Nyko nodded. “It was our healing that closed your wound, and hers that will kill the infection. Without Wanheda, you might have survived the fayagon only to drown in the water in your chest.”

He began to speak more quickly. “This is why we must work together again with Skaikru to share our knowle—”

Lexa held up a hand. “That is a matter for Heda and the clans to decide.”

“But you—”

“Em pleni,” she snapped, louder than was warranted or wise.

Before Nyko could decide whether he would submit or challenge her again, Clarke burst in through the reeds. Her eyes were round with worry. “Lexa? Is everything okay?” When she found Lexa sitting upright on the mattress, the worry vanished. A golden smile broke across her face—only to be replaced seconds later by a frown. “Hey, you shouldn’t be up. Nyko, she’s not supposed to be up.”

Nyko raised his hands in defeat, then took his leave.

Clarke stalked across the room, no doubt to wrestle Lexa back down to the mattress, but her mission was cut short by a new rustling in the doorway.

“Um, excuse me,” Octavia complained, pushing her way through, “I was literally in the middle of telling you—” Her words choked off. “Heda?”

Lexa stared evenly back at the omega girl. Inside, she quivered with apprehension.

It was one thing for Nyko to call her Commander. From what little Clarke had revealed, the healer had been isolated in Burou ever since she was shot. To him, the world must have seemed unchanged.

Octavia, on the other hand, had been sent to Polis—Lexa had overheard Clarke and Felia arguing about it while she dozed the day before. Octavia had been in the capital as recently as yesterday, and still she called Lexa Heda. The girl standing in the doorway looked sickly and weak, and a change in her scent nagged at Lexa, but she did not seem senile.

Felia hurried in behind Octavia, looking stern and fretful. “Sit down, child.” She nudged Octavia further into the room, then down onto the stool where Nyko sat earlier. Felia picked up the bowl he’d been stirring and pressed it into Octavia’s dirt-caked hands. “Eat.” She turned her sharp gaze on Clarke and Lexa. “She should be sleeping, you know.”

Clarke sighed. “So should Lexa.”

Lexa watched Octavia flex her jaw, then swallowed her distaste when she realized she had done the same.

“I’m fine,” Octavia grunted.

“By all means, Octavia, go on,” Lexa said. She hoped the steel in her voice would conceal her growing dread. “Give your report.”

Octavia glanced to Clarke, as if for permission. Lexa grit her teeth while Clarke stared down at her, arms crossed, weighing whether her patient could tolerate the truth. She was close to growling with impotent rage when at last Clarke sank down to sit beside her on the mattress. Lexa didn’t miss the way the omega wedged in behind her free shoulder to provide support, but it was infuriatingly difficult to feel indignant when Clarke’s warm body was pressed against her bare skin. The tension
in her muscles splintered, if only by a fraction.

“Go ahead, O. What did Kane say?”

“He’s been meeting with the ambassadors,” said Octavia. Despite her bravado, she slumped back against the wall. Felia brushed her hair aside and felt her forehead for fever, and Octavia had to tilt her head to make eye contact with Clarke around the older woman’s elbow. “He says you were right. He got them arguing about whether Skaikru can stay in the Coalition, and now that’s basically all they do. Roan’s up and walking around, though. Sticking his head into meetings. Kane says he and Indra don’t know what he’s up to, but…” She shrugged.

“It probably isn’t good,” Clarke finished.

Lexa pondered Marcus Kane’s presence at the center of Octavia’s news. Kane was clearly acting as the Sky People’s ambassador to the Coalition in Clarke’s absence, while he would have been cut down for so much as stepping foot in the capital on the day Lexa was shot. Even if Skaikru’s fate among the clans remained uncertain, the blockade surrounding Arkadia had obviously been lifted. But why, and by whom?

She blinked at the floorboards beside her sickbed. After months of strife to cement a truce with Clarke’s people, had her absence been all that was needed to ensure its success?

Across the room, another internal struggle was taking place. Lexa hadn’t smelled it right away, but it was unmistakable now. The stench of pain poured off Felia in waves—pain at the mention of the ruling house of Azgeda. Pain at the mention of King Roan. Roan, whose name had hardly even registered in Lexa’s mind, for she’d been too busy thinking about Clarke and her people.

Octavia grasped Felia’s shaking hand, and Clarke released a cloud of comforting omega pheromones into the room. Lexa, for her part, could only stare down at her lap like a shamed pup.

Let the Sky girls soothe Felia’s pain, she thought. It was not her place to do so—not when she was as guilty as the Ice Nation Felia so despised. Guiltier, surely, than Roan. When all the fat was boiled away, she was as much the cause of Felia’s agony as the blade that had separated Costia’s head from her shoulders. As much the reason Felia suffered as Nia.

When Lexa finally found the will to look up and face her sins, Costia’s mother was gone.

Clarke squeezed her hand. “She went to make more porridge,” she said gently.

Lexa nodded, silently acknowledging the lie. Felia was an omega, but she had a streak of pride to rival any alpha’s. She had left the room so no one would see her cry.

“Did you see my mom? Did she give you any suppressants?” Clarke asked Octavia, changing the subject with her signature boar-headed grace. It almost made Lexa smile.

“Yes. And no,” said Octavia.

“But—”

“Abby’s fine, okay? Look.” Octavia shifted on the stool and dug a fistful of foil out of the back pocket of her jeans. She pinched it by one corner, and the clump tumbled down into a long strip of squares.

Clarke sprang up from the mattress and crossed the room. “There were more antibiotics?”
Clarke took the offered medicine with care, then leaned down and engulfed Octavia in a fierce hug. “Thank you.”

Octavia patted her weakly on the back, but Clarke didn’t let go. As the seconds passed, the weight of the embrace seemed to change. Even to Lexa, Clarke’s gratitude seemed to grow far bigger than a strip of foil should warrant, no matter what was inside.

“I’m so sorry, O,” Clarke whispered. “Thank you. For everything.”

Octavia slowly disentangled herself from the hug, cheeks stained pink from Clarke’s affection. “Sure. Whatever,” she mumbled.

Clarke cleared her throat as she straightened up. “She was out of suppressants, though? Did you ask her if—?”

Octavia rolled her eyes. “I told Abby we didn’t find Heda, but you needed the antibiotics for some kind of oozing boils you caught in a lake. Pretty sure she bought it,” she interrupted, mulish in her obvious attempts to end Clarke’s questions about the so-called suppressants.

Clarke had mentioned them to Lexa once before—the compulsory Ark medicines that diminished omegas’ natural impulses and abilities. The thought of them being forced down omegas’ throats—down Clarke’s throat—was enough to set Lexa’s teeth on edge. In truth, she had no idea what form the medicine took or how it was administered. She hadn’t asked, which felt like an oversight now. If she had, perhaps she would understand why Clarke wanted Octavia to take them in her current state, which grew more obvious to Lexa by the minute.

More pressing, though, was what she had gleaned from Octavia’s brief account. If Abby Griffin had to buy that the antibiotics were for Clarke, then Lexa’s recovery was a secret even from those closest to the omega. And that meant Clarke—or perhaps Titus—believed she was still in danger.

No precedent existed for what should happen to a former commander, for no commander had ever survived their reign. Yet Lexa couldn’t decide who might want her dead now that her fate held little political consequence. The new Heda, who feared she might retake the Coalition if she lived? One of the young Nightbloods she had raised and trained?

Lexa did not allow herself to imagine Aden. She refused to picture his small, sure feet dangling from the throne, as hers had once dangled, while he nervously presided over the clan leaders. She would not allow herself that fantasy—not when Clarke’s silence the day before had so loudly proclaimed that Aden had failed to win the Conclave. Instead, she breathed through the stinging in her nose and prayed his end had been quick.

“What did Indra have to say?” Clarke asked Octavia, giving up on the suppressants. She crossed her arms, and Lexa couldn’t decide if she was apprehensive or hopeful. It was obvious the Trikru general had become her link to the Coalition and to the new commander—whoever that was.

Octavia shrugged. “About as much as usual.”

“O, please.”

The other omega sighed, but she gave in. “She said this, Octavia gestured across the room, “changes things.” Clarke’s relief was palpable. “I mean, duh, right? She said she wants both of you back in Polis, but I told her not to hold her breath,” Octavia said, her head lolling against the wall as she looked at Lexa. “No offense, but you were still pretty dead when I left.”
“None taken,” Lexa drawled.

“Anyway, Indra sent a couple warriors back with me to protect Heda until then, and—”

“What?” Clarke hissed.

In the blink of an eye, she was at the window. She unlatched it, cracking the wooden shutter just enough to peer out. Anger flared in her scent, but it was the terror underneath it that stuck in Lexa’s throat. It raised each of her alpha instincts in quick succession—to dominate, to defeat, to destroy. But she could act on none of them.

She couldn’t protect Clarke. She couldn’t even stand up.

Clarke didn’t seem to find what she was looking for through the window, for she whirled on Octavia instead. “Are you crazy, O? You said you wouldn’t tell anyone besides Indra.”

Octavia glared back at her. “I didn’t.”

“You promised. You—”

“Clarke,” Lexa said, trying to draw her out of her panic.

“Where’s my gun?” Clarke breathed, glancing between Octavia and the doorway. “Was it with the horses? Did you see it?”

“Clarke.”

All of a sudden, Clarke’s gaze locked on hers. Lexa had intended to remind her of a leader’s duty to think before acting, but she was struck silent by the desperation in Clarke’s eyes. With chilling certainty, she knew terrible things had befallen the omega while she was unconscious.

As quickly as it had come, Clarke’s attention skated away. “I have to—” She lurched toward the door. “I just—”

Every impulse in Lexa howled at her to leap up and chase after Clarke, but her neglected muscles refused to cooperate. By the time Clarke disappeared into the main room, she had hardly inched forward from the wall.

“Jesus Christ,” Octavia muttered. She pushed herself up from the stool with wobbling effort. Before she followed Clarke out, she threw an exasperated look over her shoulder. “You know, I’m happy you’re alive and everything, but my life was way easier when you weren’t.”

As Octavia vanished though the reeds, a faint smile crossed Lexa’s face.

Perhaps for the first time, she and the wildling girl had something to agree on.

Lexa sank back against the wall with a sigh. Raised, muffled voices floated in from the far side of the hut, and the alpha in her continued to rage and roar to reach the distressed omega in the other room. Instead, she focused on drawing one breath, and then another.

Clarke might have been an omega, but she was also one of the strongest people Lexa knew. She
could be trusted to fight her own battles, at least the ones waged with words. Clarke was no longer just a leader in her own right—she was the only leader among them now. Her argument with Octavia was not Lexa’s to win. The warriors whose presence worried her so were not Lexa’s to command, and the reasons Indra had sent them here were not Lexa’s to question. Not anymore.

In time, Lexa knew, the pain in her body would ease. Her muscles would strengthen, and her lungs would settle. She would stand again, and ride, and pick up a sword, and she would defend Clarke from harm whenever the omega allowed her to. But no matter how well she healed or how strong she became, she would not be what she was.

Titus had told her after her Ascension that she would never be without the Flame again, and she had believed him. It had become an intrinsic part of her, and to the outside world, Heda had become indistinguishable from Lexa. After Costia’s death, her own ability to divide the two had washed away with the blood on her bedsheets.

Had she died that day in the tower, as Clarke had witnessed, her body and her spirit—the Spirit—would have departed this life together. She would have been sent up to the stars, and the Spirit would have moved on to choose the next commander. Now the Spirit had moved on, but she had been left behind.

Lexa’s careful breathing faltered. It was then that she realized the arguing in the other room had finally quieted.

Clarke slipped back in through the reeds, looking contrite.

“Hey,” Clarke said, softer than before. She hovered near the doorway, shifting her weight, as though unsure she was welcome.

“Hey,” Lexa imitated. Despite the disquiet in her mind, she couldn’t help the flush of warmth she felt in the omega’s presence, or the way her tongue stuck in her mouth like some branwada pup’s. To avoid making a fool of herself, she stayed silent as she touched the mattress beside her.

Clarke crossed the room like a magnet. She dropped down onto the bed and huddled close to Lexa’s side, which made the alpha in Lexa strut and crow—until she realized Clarke was trembling.

“No, no, I’m fine.” Clarke’s shaky voice suggested otherwise, but Lexa’s panic receded.

“What happened?”

“I just—I thought—” Clarke dug her palm into her forehead, squeezing her eyes shut. “There are two warriors outside, hiding in the trees. I thought Octavia and Indra told them you were alive. Then it would just be a matter of time until they told someone, and they told someone, and all I could think about was somebody coming here to finish what Titus started.” Her hands curled into white-knuckled fists. “I won’t let that happen.”

If there was anyone Lexa believed could bend the world through sheer force of will, it was Clarke Griffin. “I know,” she agreed softly.

Clarke’s head fell onto her bare collarbone. Her voice broke. “I can’t survive it again, Lexa. You have to be okay. Okay?”
“Shh.” Clarke was wrong, Lexa knew. She was stronger than she realized, and she would persevere. Still, the fear in her voice cut Lexa like a knife. She threaded her fingers through Clarke’s hair, cradling the back of her head. “I am.”

With her nose buried against the base of Lexa’s neck, Clarke drew a long, shaky breath. Only then did the trembling calm. She picked at her sleeve, seemingly embarrassed by the slip of her calm healer’s facade, but she didn’t pull away.

“I was a total ass,” Clarke said, shoulders slumping. “I bit O’s head off for no reason. She and Indra just told the warriors to protect Felia’s hut, they didn’t tell them why.”

Unbidden, an image of Lincoln, bloody and still, flashed in Lexa’s mind. “Be gentle with her,” she murmured.

Clarke sat back to look at her, perplexed. “Octavia?”

Gentleness was not an approach Lexa often championed, and Octavia was probably one of the last people Clarke would expect her to defend. But when Lexa imagined herself in Lincoln’s shoes, the words came naturally. Had she taken Clarke as a mate and left her behind the way Lincoln had left Octavia, Clarke’s survival would have depended upon the care and compassion of friends. Heda had not been a true friend to Lincoln in his lifetime, but Lexa could be one now.

“She is struggling,” Lexa said. “It will get worse before it gets better.”

Clarke’s confusion gave way to mournful guilt. “I know, the mate sickness.” She tugged a hand through her hair. “I didn’t want to send her all the way to Polis, but I couldn’t tell anyone else, and —”

Clarke didn’t know, Lexa realized. As an omega, she couldn’t smell the difference in Octavia’s scent—not yet.

“Clarke,” she interrupted. “Octavia is pregnant.”

The omega’s gaze flicked up. “Wait, what?”

Lexa did not repeat herself. She knew Clarke had heard her. Even as she sputtered in disbelief, Lexa saw her mind working. She was cataloging the signs she had overlooked. Counting the tells she had missed.

“That’s why my mom wouldn’t give her suppressants for the mate sickness. You can’t take them when you’re pregnant.” Clarke’s eyes were wide and unfocused as she stared out across the room. Hurt for Octavia shone on her face. “Oh my god, O. I didn’t know, Lexa, I swear. I wouldn’t have… I never would have…” She trailed off, looking haunted.

Lexa understood what Clarke could not say. The omega had weighed the risks and the benefits over again, and she had come to the conclusion that knowing the extent of the danger her friend would face would not have changed her course of action. It was a bitter realization with which Lexa was all too familiar.

“Octavia is safe now,” she said, hoping to ease the burden. “Felia will care for her.”

Clarke managed a weak smile at the mention of the older woman. She let her head fall back onto Lexa’s shoulder. “I guess she doesn’t mind having patients around.”

Lexa hummed her agreement.
She couldn’t help but think of the last time she had come to this hut, and how desperately Felia had wanted a patient then. Despite the terrible news a rider from the capital had delivered days before, Felia had rushed out to meet Lexa’s party with bandages and poultices overflowing from her arms. Despite every indication to the contrary, she had begged and wished and prayed that Lexa would arrive with her baby girl in tow—bruised and bloodied, but still breathing. Lexa would have done anything to make it so.

Now she wondered if a wish that ferocious could ever have faded, or if it had entwined with Felia’s soul and settled there. If it was why Felia had cared for her, and why she knew instinctively that she would look after the pregnant omega. After all these years, someone had finally arrived who could still be helped.

“Someone must tell Indra’s warriors about the sentries stationed here,” Lexa said, before her voice could get any hoarser. “I sent two to watch over this house after Costia was killed. If they meet by surprise, someone will get hurt.”

Clarke straightened up. She seemed grateful to set aside past regrets and focus on present strategy.

“Don’t worry, Indra sent the same warriors who were here before,” Clarke said. “That’s the excuse she gave them—she told them they were coming to protect Felia again. They were called back to Polis after you…” She swallowed, then squared her shoulders. “No one’s getting hurt anymore.”

Instead of easing Lexa’s fears, Clarke’s words trickled ice down her spine.

Among the handful of promises she had asked her Natblida to swear to her, Felia’s safety had been one of the most important. Each and every one of them had known that. Each and every one of them had sworn they would protect her, chins tilted and eyes shining with love, just as they had sworn to protect Clarke.

Not one of the Nightbloods would have withdrawn her sentries from Burou.

Not one.

Not unless…

“Clarke—”

In the revelry that followed hard-won battles, Lexa had often overheard her warriors boasting that they had seen their lives flash before their eyes during their direst moments. She had never fully believed them—not until now.

Now, Lexa saw decades of bloodshed over territory and resources in the borrowed memories of the commanders who had preceded her. She saw the third Heda put his bloodied thumb to the first tentative treaty between Trikru and Sankru, and the fourth offer her brand to negotiators from Podakru and Yujleda. She saw old enemies join hands to fight new ones, and distant neighbors break bread as friends, and her own small self, no older than six winters, staring up at the banners that beat over Polis, her heart fierce with pride. She saw her Conclave, and a stained box in her bed, and the Azgeda flag rising to join eleven others. A star falling from the sky, a girl with iron courage, a burn on Marcus Kane’s arm.

In the space of a single heartbeat, Lexa saw peace.

In the next, she saw it burn to the ground.

“—who is Heda?”
I know I took a leap by diving into Lexa's point of view after so many chapters from Clarke. Please let me know if it worked for you! Clarke will be back front and center in the next chapter, but Lexa's perspective may pop up again if it feels right.

As always, thank you guys so much for your support and encouragement.

_Fayagon - gun_  
_Sha, strikon - yes, little one_  
_Mounin hou, Heda - welcome back, Commander_  
_En’s ogud nau - it’s okay now_  
_Sha, Heda? - yes, Commander?_  
_Em pleni - enough_  
_Branwada - fool_  
_Natblida - Nightblood(s)
Clarke and Lexa sat together on the straw mattress in Felia’s hut, their legs outstretched and their backs against the wall.

“Clarke,” Lexa said again. “Who is Heda?”

Clarke avoided her piercing eyes, searching inside herself for the strength to answer.

For two and a half excruciating weeks, she had thought she would never see those eyes again. And now here they were—worried and bloodshot, but so very alive.

When Lexa had first awoken, she’d avoided divulging the horrors of those weeks out of fear that the former commander would hear of everything that had happened and decide to stop fighting. Decide this world wasn’t worth living for after all.

Now that Lexa was sitting upright at her side—now that her fever had broken and the infection in her lungs had begun to clear—Clarke kept quiet for a more selfish reason. No matter how many times she told herself that Lexa deserved to know the truth, she just couldn’t bear to peer up into those eyes she had longed for, only to see nothing but agony and defeat.

“Clarke, please.” Lexa’s voice was hoarse, but it carried no trace of the alpha dominance that could have compelled Clarke to bend to her will—and it was this immutable humanity, even in the darkest moments, that finally broke her.

She shifted a few inches from where she was pressed against Lexa’s side, shaking her head to rid her nostrils of the alpha’s heady musk. Lexa’s skin was covered by nothing but the linen sheet tucked under her armpits, and the stench of sickness had dissipated enough to let her powerful scent break through. If Clarke was going to muster the strength to speak of those horrible days, she needed a clear head. And she needed to be able to look Lexa in the eye, no matter how much it pained her. The alpha deserved that much.

With a last shuddering exhale, Clarke dove in. “There is no Heda.”

Lexa’s brows raised almost imperceptibly. “But who won the Conclave after my death?”

She could see the pulsing hope Lexa was trying to conceal, and it was almost worse than the agony she’d expected. She knew Lexa had drawn dismal conclusions about Aden’s fate the day before, when she, Clarke, had changed the subject every time he was mentioned. But now it was obvious that Lexa prayed those conclusions had been wrong—for if there was no Heda, perhaps there had been no Conclave either.

Clarke took no pleasure in telling her she was right. “There wasn’t one. Ontari came back to Polis,
and she…” She wanted nothing more than to stop and curl back into Lexa’s side, hands clapped over her ears like a child. But she pressed on, her voice thick. “She killed the other Nightbloods before they could hold a Conclave. I’m so sorry, Lexa.”

A tremor ran through the former Heda. “No.”

Clarke nodded, feeling miserable. She didn’t trust her own voice.

“That’s impossible,” Lexa said, grasping. “The Natblida are extensively trained. Together they would have overcome—”

“They weren’t together.” Clarke opened her mouth, then closed it. She choked down the fiery lump in her throat as she recalled that awful morning, the throne room smeared black with children’s blood. “They were sleeping.”

Lexa’s spine straightened like a rod. She looked out across the room, but it was clear she wasn’t really seeing anything. “You’re certain,” she whispered. “All of them.”

Clarke’s mind flashed to Aden’s head dangling from Ontari’s hand, and she barely managed to hold back the bile that threatened to gag her. “Yes.”

The alpha gave a hint of a nod, then turned to stone. Clarke ached to pull her close, but Lexa reminded her of the regal statues in her old school readers—one so ancient and weathered it would crumble to dust if she dared to reach out and touch it. For many aching minutes she kept her hands clenched in her lap, silent tears rolling down her cheeks. For a second she thought she smelled a wisp of anguished alpha rage, but it was gone by the time she inhaled again.

And then, finally, Lexa’s eyes drifted shut. A tear of her own spilled onto the sheet, and Clarke couldn’t hold back any longer. She leaned in and engulfed Lexa in a tight embrace.

The alpha trembled in her arms, but she didn’t break. “I knew most would die,” she said, speaking over Clarke’s shoulder. “The one who prevails carries the torch for the many who do not. That is our way.”

It was a fucking stupid way, Clarke wanted to growl. But this was not the time for policy debate, or for her own bitter regret. This time was for Lexa. Not Heda—Lexa.

“But for none to survive…” Lexa whispered, her fingers clenching into Clarke’s ribs. “None…”

Clarke squeezed her tighter, and this time she knew she could smell the heartache and impotent fury that had managed to slip past Lexa’s tight control. It reminded her of the way her cell had smelled after she’d watched her father get floated—the scent of Lexa’s bedroom on that fateful night—the waves that had rolled off Octavia when Lincoln had slumped into the dirt.

It was the stench of death branded into the living, and Clarke would have done anything to scour it from Lexa’s skin—if only she’d ever figured out how. Instead she released cloud after cloud of comforting omega pheromones into the small room, heedless of how it might sap her own strength. If it eased the loss of Lexa’s Nightbloods for even a moment, no price was too high.

Her efforts seemed to help, for in time the alpha straightened up. Her eyes were red, but her lips were set in a hard line. “Ontari?” she asked, more a snarl than a question.

“Dead.”

Lexa’s tense shoulders fell slightly, and Clarke wondered if she felt disappointment or relief. She had
missed the opportunity to rip Ontari to pieces, as Clarke could tell from her quivering biceps she yearned to do. But Lexa had also been spared the fate of staring into the face of yet another Azgeda woman who had stolen the future from her, only to be forced to turn her cheek once again—as surely would have happened if Ontari had lived to ascend.

“It was painful,” Clarke said, her teeth gritted. She was ashamed of herself for saying it, and even more so for clutching the knowledge close to her heart and letting it soothe the blackest places inside her soul. “I know blood must not have blood, but…”

She shook her head. It had been Aden. Ontari had killed Aden.

Lexa seemed to hear the unspoken words, and Clarke’s flagrant thirst for revenge appeared to slake the alpha’s own, at least for now. The muscles in her arms stopped quivering, and she took Clarke’s hand.

“What else?” Lexa asked.

Clarke wiped roughly at her cheeks with the heel of her free hand. “Before she died, Ontari did declare herself Heda, but she wasn’t. She didn’t have the Spirit.”

Lexa frowned—as much as she ever let herself. “Then who did?”

“Me,” Clarke admitted. “After Ontari took control, Titus made me the Flamekeeper. He gave me this.” With shaky fingers, she reached into the waistband of the loose Trikru pants Felia had given her to wear and produced the tin case that held the Spirit of the Commander. She hadn’t known if Lexa would recognize it, since the true nature of the Flame had been Titus’s domain, but the alpha’s eyes widened.

“Titus gave you the fleimkidon,” Lexa said, her doubt plain. She studied the painted skull on the case’s front. “He does not let it out of his sight. And no matter how I order him, he will not tell me precisely what it contains.”

Clarke suspected the beta Flamekeeper would have confessed in a heartbeat if Lexa had issued the command with the force of her alpha tenor, but she knew Lexa had respected and cared for him too much to compel him to action against his will. He had been a father to her when she had no other, and his death would be yet another loss for Clarke to pile upon her bowing back.

“He kept his promise to you,” Clarke said. She shifted her weight, worrying at a piece of straw that jabbed out from the mattress. Despite how she hated to acknowledge the things Titus had done right, Lexa deserved whatever small comfort she could offer. “He protected me, and he got me out of Polis. But then he…” She licked her lips. “Lexa, he killed himself to keep Ontari from getting the Spirit and becoming Heda.”

This time there was no mistaking Lexa’s small sigh of relief. “Good.”

Clarke blinked. “Good?”

“Titus committed treason,” Lexa had slipped into the aloof, omniscient tone she’d once used to deliver her spontaneous leadership lessons, what felt like a lifetime ago. “Even if blood must not have blood, treachery must have consequences. If he still lived, I would have been obligated to kill him myself. Perhaps not as Heda, but certainly as y—” Lexa faltered, as if her mouth had become suddenly dry, and small streaks of heat flared in her cheeks.

Clarke could hear the words that had escaped her, just as she had heard the hidden whisper behind That’s why you’re you.
As your alpha, Lexa was going to say.

As Clarke’s alpha, she would have had a duty to avenge the attempt on Clarke’s life regardless of whether she was or was not still the commander. In Lexa’s mind, Titus was dead the moment his first shot rang out. The only question that had remained was whether she would have to be the one to peer into her mentor’s eyes and drive a blade through his gut.

“As an alpha,” Lexa finished, clearing her throat.

Clarke squeezed her hand in understanding. In truth, Lexa wasn’t her alpha. Not really. Not by mating, nor even by the intentions signaled by knotting. There hadn’t been time yet to talk about any of that—about their future or even about them.

Still, the possibilities in Lexa’s bashful voice made the light in Clarke’s heart flicker and grow. That light had never stopped burning after the alpha’s death, and it wouldn’t stop now, no matter how heavy the darkness that surrounded them. With the slightest spark of encouragement from Lexa, Clarke knew it would become an inferno—and she would walk gladly into the flames.

“What is this?” Lexa asked. She made a sour face as she sniffed at the metal mug she held, and Clarke’s chest swelled at the absurd, impossible normalcy of it all.

Her sorry tale of the days the alpha was unconscious had been interrupted by Nyko, come bearing mugs and news from the fire room. Lexa had received broth and a few fingers of bitter-smelling, pink-tinged water, while Clarke had been the grateful recipient of a hot, milky tea. There was a loaf of brown bread, too, and she found herself tearing off fistfuls like she hadn’t eaten in weeks.

Octavia was pregnant, Nyko told them with a pained smile, not realizing that Lexa had already sniffed out the truth. Abby had performed a test in Polis, he said, and it made sense now why Octavia’s mate sickness had set in so quickly. Felia, for her part, was busy watching over the mother-to-be. There were teas to be brewed and tonics to be mixed, Nyko had said, trying to sound cheerful. Exercises to practice and herbs to burn.

Clarke listened to all of it in achy silence. She knew from experience that no tonic they could concoct would ease a loss like Octavia’s—not where it hurt the most.

Nyko returned to the fire room soon after, leaving Clarke keenly aware of how lucky she was. Days ago, Lexa had been dead. Today, the biggest hurdle to her recovery was the mug of dissolved antibiotics in her hands and the grimace she pulled as she sipped from it.

“It’s your medicine,” Clarke answered, “and you’re definitely drinking it, so don’t even try me. You can switch to pills next time, but this one was already ground up.”

Lessa pursed her lips, setting the cup down beside the mattress. “No, Clarke. What is this?” She tapped one long finger on the metal skull that sat between them.

Clarke flushed. “Oh.”

“Mm.”

Chagrined, Clarke gulped down her last bite of bread, then tenderly lifted Titus’s case for Lexa to
examine. “It’s the Flame.”

Lexa stared at the tin box. “That is impossible. The Flame is the Spirit. It passes from one commander to the next.”

“I know. This is the Spirit. But…” She considered how to explain. “It’s not a spirit. Not like that word usually means.”

The alpha’s face remained blank. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s a thing. I watched Titus—” Clarke swallowed against the images that flashed in her mind. “I watched him take it out of you when we thought you were dead.”

She saw the scalpel slice into Lexa’s neck as sharply as if it were happening now. She saw the alpha’s pallid skin, and Titus’s gaunt hands, and the ragged red cloth at his side. She smelled the rust on his tools, the black blood congealing in Lexa’s hair, the salt of her own useless tears.

It was only the hand on her knee and the scent of alpha in her nose that prevented her from tumbling all the way into that abyss. It was only Lexa’s steady presence at her side that kept her tethered, however tenuously, to the present.

“The Flame doesn’t just magically float from one commander to the next,” Clarke continued, forcing the memories down. “The Flamekeeper moves it. Look.”

She slid the tin open, revealing the small blue chip inside. For so many days she had longed to take it out and clutch it to her chest, but she had feared how the oils on her hands might damage the hardware and the woman inside. Now she lifted the chip between her thumb and forefinger and held it up for Lexa’s inspection.

Lexa stared. “That was in my body,” she said, her voice flat.

“Yeah. In your spine. Right here.” Clarke touched the back of her own neck, and she saw the moment when Lexa began to believe.

“There was a wound here when I awoke after my Ascension,” the alpha said slowly, prodding at the scar at the nape of her neck. “Titus told me I received it during my Conclave, but I could not recall being struck from behind.”

Clarke shook her head. “You weren’t. Titus took it out of the last commander when they died, then put it in you after you won. That was your Ascension. This is the Spirit, Lexa. This is what makes someone Heda.”

Lexa’s doubt reared up to make a final stand. “The Spirit contains the line of commanders,” she argued, as if that were any less absurd a notion than the past commanders living inside a computer chip.

“I know,” Clarke said. “So does this.”

With a grimace, Lexa reached out to take the Flame. She turned it over in her fingers, then held it up to the afternoon light that snuck in around the edges of the window. She let it tumble several inches from one hand to the other, like a Grounder child testing the spin of a shiny rock.

“Be careful!”

Lexa’s gaze flicked up in concern, the chip cradled in her palm.
Clarke stamped down her momentary panic, feeling embarrassed. “Sorry. It’s just… for a while, the Flame was the only you I had left.” As soon as the words came out, they felt too trite too have spoken aloud—too small to explain the tremendous emotions she had felt toward the little piece of plastic in the alpha’s hand.

She felt grateful when Lexa looked away, her attention drifting back to the Flame. “Are you suggesting… I am inside this object?”

Clarke cleared her throat. “Sort of, yeah. It holds a copy of your consciousness at the time it was removed.”

She went on to explain Becca Pramheda’s artificial intelligence work as best she could, leaning on the rudimentary understanding of Old Earth tech that Lexa had gleaned from books in the Polis library. Still, it was obvious the former commander was struggling to process all she was hearing. And how could Clarke blame her? She’d been rattled enough when she learned the truth about the Flame, and she wasn’t the one whose spine it had been embedded in.

“You were still you, Lexa,” she said, when she saw nausea start to color the alpha’s face. That had been her own biggest fear about the Spirit, and she had to assume it was Lexa’s, too. “The Flame was an A.I., but you weren’t. Even Titus said so. After you became Heda, you were still everything you were before. The Flame just amplified you.”

Lexa nodded absently, but she said nothing.

“Titus gave it to me so Ontari couldn’t ascend. He told me about Luna, so I took it to her. She was the last living Nightblood.”

Lexa looked up with surprise, jerked from her thoughts. “Luna,” she echoed.

“I went to Floukru to ask her to take the Flame, but she refused.” Clarke smiled ruefully. “Then I tried to force her to take it, and you can probably guess how well that went.”

Just as Clarke had hoped, the alpha let out a faint hum of amusement. “I presume you were unsuccessful.”

“Yeah, and bruised.”

“She has bruised me, too.” The corners of Lexa’s mouth twitched up, and some of the tension eased from her posture. “On rare occasions,” she clarified, then paused. “She’s not…?”

“She’s alive,” Clarke rushed to add. “As far as I know. I left her on the oil rig.”

Lexa nodded, exhaling. “So you left Luna in peace, and no one succeeded me as Heda.”

“Well.” Clarke sucked her lower lip between her teeth. “Technically, I succeeded you.”

Lexa’s eyes grew as she considered the omega before her. “I would say that is impossible, but each time I do I seem to be proven wrong.”

“Trust me, I know the feeling. I was only Heda for a little while. Ontari was almost dead, and my mom pumped her blood into my veins to—”

“To make you a Nightblood,” Lexa finished, following the story to its logical conclusion. She peered at Clarke with newfound curiosity.
“Yeah. I mean, temporarily.” Suddenly Clarke felt self-conscious, here in the presence of the real commander. “Not because I wanted the power. I had to do it. There was nothing else that—”

“Clarke.” Lexa spoke with a small smile, covering Clarke’s fidgeting hands. “I told you my Spirit would choose wisely.”

Clarke couldn’t help but grin back. It had been Lexa inside the chip—really, truly Lexa. “That’s the same thing you said in the City of Light.”

Then Lexa’s forehead creased, and any levity Clarke felt evaporated.

“The City of Light is why I needed the Flame,” she explained. “There was another A.I. A rival to this one.” She tapped on the back of Lexa’s hand, which still held the chip. “Becca Pramheda created it before the bombs fell. Its mission was to save humanity, but it tried to do that by luring people into a virtual city and letting them die in the real world.”

“Save humanity from what?”

Internally, Clarke cursed her careless words. She knew she would eventually have to reveal the nuclear danger A.L.I.E. had warned her about, but not while Lexa was still so weak. Not while she might try to spring up and set out for Polis, only to collapse three steps from Felia’s hut.

“Itself,” Clarke said simply, plowing on before Lexa could ask for details. “The A.I. took over Arkadia, and then Polis. It was going to spread across the whole Coalition, and the only way to stop it was for someone to go into the virtual city with the Flame.”

“You,” Lexa guessed, a hint of pride in her voice.

“And you. You helped me. You saved my life in the City of Light so I could find the kill switch and stop the A.I.”

Lexa looked doubtful. “I did.”

“Well, the version of you that’s in the Flame did.”

With mild distaste, Lexa placed the chip back inside the tin she held. It was obvious she couldn’t quite conceptualize what Clarke meant when she spoke of artificial intelligence and virtual reality, and it was equally obvious that she didn’t really care. Lexa’s was a world of blood and flesh and steel.

“I don’t know what the past commanders are like when they’re in your head,” Clarke said, “but in the City of Light you had a physical presence. You were you, Lexa.” She had made it through three weeks of hell by believing that. Even now that she had the real woman here beside her, she still felt a connection to the bits of code in Lexa’s hand.

“What has become of Polis?” Lexa asked, turning her attention from the fleimkidon. It was clear her energy was flagging, no matter how she tried to hide it. “Who heads the Coalition?”

Clarke swallowed. “No one.”

Lexa drew a sharp breath, and Clarke could practically see the dreams of peace crumbling behind her eyes.

“Indra is keeping order in Polis,” she added quickly, hoping to reassure Lexa while simultaneously stemming any further questions about the crucified capital. “I just don’t know how long that can
Lexa was somber. “Not long. And no matter how competent Indra’s leadership, her influence will not reach far. If she holds Polis, it is only because the city happens to sit on Woods Clan land. The other clans won’t accept a Trikru general commanding the entire Coalition.”

“I know. At least not without a lot of death, which is what I’m trying to avoid. None of the clans have risen up yet, but it’s only a matter of time. Kane and Indra are trying to manage the ambassadors to keep the Coalition steady, but…”

“But without a suitable commander, there is no Coalition.”

“Exactly,” Clarke said, exhaling with relief. Lexa had gotten to the root of the matter, as she’d known she would, and she could finally stop recounting the worst days of her life. Lexa was here now—alive now—and they would figure the rest of it out together.

“And this is why you searched for me,” Lexa concluded.

“Ye—” Too late, Clarke realized the alpha’s voice had become distant, and her posture as rigid as the armor she wore into battle. “No, Lexa, that’s not—”

“I understand, Clarke,” Lexa said, offering a faint smile. “This is what you thought was best for our people.”

The brittle words smacked of sacrifice and regret, and they made Clarke want to scream. Yet how could she blame Lexa for her reticence? The alpha’s last memories of her were the half-truths of Maybe someday and That’s why you’re you. She didn’t know about the sobs that had brought Clarke to her knees when Titus disappeared with her body, or the quaking nightmares that woke her each night, or the gouges in her palm from clutching the brass gear that once adorned the commander’s forehead.

Clarke, though, had had the benefit of time. Lexa’s death had forced her to face her feelings for the commander—feelings that probably would have taken much longer to acknowledge and speak aloud if the alpha had been alive and well at her side. And while she had voiced those feelings to Lexa’s uploaded consciousness, she’d never said them to Lexa herself.

“No, you don’t understand,” Clarke said forcefully. She shifted to sit on her bare heels, facing Lexa, her knees pressed against the alpha’s outstretched thigh. “We do need a commander, but that’s not why I came.”

Lexa didn’t seem to be listening. She turned Titus’s case over in her hand, then handed it back to Clarke. “Here.”

Clarke blinked, disconcerted by the sudden change of subject. “What?” she said, staring dumbly at the tin she now held. The tin she’d been tracked and tormented and tortured for, all so she could give it to the rightful commander one day. So she could give it to Lexa.

“I am no longer Heda.” The alpha spoke dispassionately, as though her words were self-evident. “I had the chance to lead, and I failed. The Spirit left my body to find another. I will serve our people however I can, Clarke, but I will not betray the Spirit’s wishes by arranging my own ascension.”

“There are no others for it to find,” Clarke sputtered. “And even if there were, you’re—”

“I am sorry to have disappointed you, Flamekeeper.” Lexa looked away. She let her head tilt back
against the wall, and her eyes slipped shut. “I would like to rest now.”

Clarke’s heart cracked. Not because she was disappointed, but because she knew this particular brand of self-doubt all too well. She had spent weeks wallowing in it while she wandered the woods after Mount Weather. Then Lexa had brought her to Polis and pushed her to reconnect with the world, and in time she had found ways to overcome her misery. Ways to cope with her ghosts so she could go on fighting for the living who still needed her. Lexa hadn’t given up on her then no matter how hard she’d fought, and Clarke wasn’t just going to get up and walk out on Lexa now—not even if the alpha ordered her to.

“You’re scared,” Clarke said softly, resting her palm on Lexa’s leg. Her words were gentle, not goading, but the alpha stiffened all the same. “I get it. You feel weak, and abandoned by the past commanders, and you don’t know if your people will welcome you back. But you’ll get stronger. And Lexa, they will.”

*And if they don’t, I’ll make them,* she thought fiercely.

“A commander does not ascend twice,” Lexa ground out, her eyes still closed. “It is not our way.”

“Peace wasn’t the Trikru way, either. Not until you made it so.”

Lexa’s eyes flashed open in frustration. “It is no longer my place it *make it so.* And if you believe my legacy was peace, you haven’t been paying attention.”

Clarke flinched at the angry pheromones that had broken free, and at the truth behind the alpha’s pained words. Lexa’s legacy *should* have been peace, but those dreams were shattered the second Ontari arrived in Polis for the Conclave.

“It still can be,” she insisted. “You’re still alive, and that means you still get to decide what your legacy’s going to be.” She squeezed Lexa’s leg. “I know bad things happened when you were Heda. I do. But Lexa, way worse stuff happened when you weren’t.”

Lexa sniffed in disbelief, and Clarke squeezed harder. They sat together at the impasse for many silent minutes, until the anger in the alpha’s scent slowly began to give way to defeat.

“I let Skaikru slaughter hundreds of my people,” Lexa said, voice low. “I let my emotions cloud my judgment, and in the end I still couldn’t protect—” She glanced at Clarke and swallowed, then looked out across the room. “Myself. I could not even save myself, Clarke. How can I expect to help anyone else?”

Clarke let the *fleimkidon* fall to the mattress and grasped Lexa’s clenched hands in both of hers.

“What happened out in that field was not your fault. I’m the one who should have been in Arkadia to stop Pike before he got anywhere near the chancellor’s pin. I should have realized something was up with Bellamy, and I should have known Titus wouldn’t just sit back and accept *jus drein nou jus daun.* I did know, I just—” Her throat felt tight. “I wanted to stay with you.”

Lexa finally looked at her square, her gaze as haunted as it was penetrating. But it was the aching hope in her eyes—hope she obviously didn’t mean to show—that made the breath catch in Clarke’s lungs.

Clarke knew this was not the time for a confession.

There were breadcrumbs on the sheets and other people’s tense voices floating in from the other room. Her cheeks were rough and wind-burned from days on the road, her hair knotted from neglect. Lexa was no longer looking at her, but at the painted tin on the mattress between them. They both
smelled like pain, and worry, and regret. But if Clarke had learned one thing from Lexa’s death, it was that time was not something she could count on.

When the words threatened to spill out, she didn’t stop them.

“I’m in love with you, Lexa.”

Lexa’s eyes snapped to hers. They were the only part of her that moved, flicking from side to side as they searched Clarke’s own.

Clarke held steady under her scrutiny, willing her to see the truth. To see that she wasn’t here because it was the best thing for their people, or for the Coalition, or for peace.

She was here for her heart.

Only when the silence stretched on did Clarke look down. She drew her clammy palms back to wipe them on her pants, suddenly hyper-aware of the vague reply Lexa had given in the City of Light, and of whose house they sat in now. Of the quickness of her own breath, and the way she couldn’t seem to remember what she usually did with her hands.

She should have thought of something to say next. She should have had a backup plan for if Lexa wasn’t ready. She should have waited until they’d both had more time to process everything that had happened, and she should have—

“Klark.” Lexa’s voice was barely a whisper. “Ai hod yu in.”

Clarke’s head shot up, surprise and elation flooding her chest. Before she could give voice to any of it, Lexa leaned forward and captured her lips.

She kissed back with every searing wave of longing she’d felt in Lexa’s absence, every sliver of hope, every rush of joy. She had ghosted her lips over Lexa’s skin while she was still unconscious, but this was what she had yearned for—Lexa’s mouth on hers, awake and trembling and insistent. Clarke kissed her until she couldn’t anymore—until she was grinning too widely to keep going, even as tears stung her eyes.

“I don’t care if you become Heda,” she choked out, her lips still touching Lexa’s. In this moment, she didn’t. She would find some other way to save the world, even if she didn’t have a clue what it could be. “But you can’t leave me like that again, okay?”

Lexus wiped a stray tear from Clarke’s cheekbone, pressing their foreheads together. Her eyes fluttered shut, and she nodded.

Buoyed, Clarke surged forward to meet her lips once more. The kiss started out bright and blissful, soaring above them, but it soon grew roots and took hold deep in her center. Heat rose up from somewhere inside, and all at once she found herself tangled in Lexa’s lap. She didn’t know if she had climbed in or if Lexa had dragged her, but the tears and the smiles vanished. All that remained now was the alpha beneath her—the scent and the strength of her—and the mouth that moved hungrily against her own. It wasn’t until Clarke ground down and felt something hard between her legs that her reason switched on like a harsh fluorescent bulb.

“We should stop,” she gasped, pulling back an inch. Lexa’s body followed, and Clarke flushed at the press of her breasts through the sheet. “You’re still hurt. You need rest.”

Lexa snorted. “I have been injured before. I am not tired.”
Despite the alpha’s dismissive words, Clarke could hear the exhaustion in her voice. She could see the rattling cough she was holding in, and the way she struggled to balance both their weight without sinking back against the wall.

“I’m tired,” Clarke lied, urging the alpha’s shoulders back.

Lexa’s expression morphed from desire to protective concern, then to suspicion—complete with narrowed eyes and a grimace as she realized she’d been deceived, if only for a split second. Clarke almost laughed at how easy the alpha was to read now, from the tented sheet between them to her regretful sigh.

With a last scorching kiss, she untangled their folded legs to lessen the strain on Lexa’s muscles. She straddled her hips instead, holding her own weight, and curled forward to nuzzle into the alpha’s neck. After several slow draws of Lexa’s powerful musk, she managed to catch her breath—and she realized she might not have been lying after all.

Though it was only late afternoon, her eyelids felt heavy. Maybe it was the emotional turmoil of the last few hours, or maybe the many days on the road were finally taking their toll. Or perhaps she was just succumbing to the essence of alpha that crashed through her senses, dark and dominant and undeniably Lexa.

With great effort, Clarke started to shift away so they could both could lie down. “I should—”

Lexa’s fingers dug into her thighs, and she gave a throaty plea disguised as a growl. “Stay.”

The word shot a smoldering arrow through Clarke’s middle. She could feel Lexa’s arousal pressing into the seam of her pants, though the alpha seemed to be taking great pains not to move a muscle, whether for Clarke’s comfort or her own sanity. That didn’t stop the wetness that pooled tauntingly between Clarke’s legs, and she was sure Lexa could smell it in the air. A flush crept up her neck, but the grip on her thighs only tightened.

Clarke rocked experimentally against Lexa’s chest, half abashed and half intoxicated by the still-novel feeling of alpha between her legs. Lexa’s hardness made her stomach flutter and her insides clench, but she knew it could come to no more than that. The road they were headed down was one neither of them had the strength to travel, and there was no power on the planet that could convince her to put Lexa’s health on the line—not even Lexa herself. She opened her mouth to tell the alpha as much, but a wide, creaking yawn came out instead.

Lexa’s arms curled loosely around her lower back, drawing her closer. Her amused voice husked in Clarke’s ear. “Rest.”

Despite her best intentions, Clarke sagged forward into the embrace. “Just for a second,” she murmured, her nose buried in the crook of Lexa’s neck.

There was still so much to do. So much to plan for and strategize—and so much she still hadn’t told Lexa.

The former commander knew the Coalition was short a leader, but she didn’t know just how dire the consequences would be if they failed to reunify the clans and find a way to stop the nuclear meltdown. Once radiation poisoning started sweeping the eastern seaboard, civil war would be the least of their concerns.

Clarke knew she would have to make Lexa see just how badly she was needed. And if the question of ascension was their people’s to answer, then she would have to make sure the people chose well.
A sleepy sigh rasped in Lexa’s chest, and Clarke was reminded that what she’d said was true. She had come here for more than just a new commander, and Lexa was so much more than just Heda. She was a woman first—a person first—and she needed to heal herself before she could heal an entire civilization.

Clarke pressed her lips to Lexa’s throat, her eyes slipping shut. She would only stay for a second, and then she would slip away to let Lexa sleep in peace. She owed Octavia an apology and her congratulations, and she knew Felia could use help looking after her unexpected houseguests. After that, there was still her drawing to finish.

She only needed a second before then. A second to be nothing more than an omega splayed atop her alpha, breathing the world in through her scent.

A second to be just a girl in love.

Chapter End Notes

As usual, I'd love to hear your thoughts! :)  

Natblida - nighthood(s)  
Fleimkidon - flame kit  
Jus drein nou jus daun - blood must not have blood  
Klark, ai hod yu in - Clarke, I love you
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Clarke struggles for and against what she needs.

Chapter Notes

We're back! Thanks for bearing with the long wait--I was on vacation for a couple weeks and got even more behind than usual.

Some consent issues come up in this chapter, so please proceed with caution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Some time after she fell asleep in Lexa’s lap, Clarke woke to a crackling sound and the smell of smoke.

Her eyes stung as soon as she opened them. It was nighttime, and a gray haze filled the dark room. She couldn’t see more than a few inches in front of her face—save for an ominous orange glow surrounding the reed doorway.

Clarke shot upright on the straw mattress, fear piercing her chest. “Fire!” she cried, croaky at first, and then again, louder.

There was no answer—not from beyond the door, and not from within the room.

Clarke’s heart pounded. “Lexa?”

She skated her hands across the sheet at her side, squinting against the burning air, but the bed was empty. Lexa was gone.

To find help, Clarke told herself. To get water. To warn the others.

Her head felt fuzzy, but Clarke had the presence of mind to yank her sleeve over one hand. With the fabric cupped over her mouth, she crawled sideways off the mattress to stay beneath the smoke line.

The glow around the door was getting brighter, the flames behind it hotter, which meant her best chance of escape was the small window in the bedroom wall. It wasn’t big enough for a person to fit through, but maybe she could tear away the reeds around it to widen the hole. That had to be what Lexa had thought to do, too. That had to be where she was. It had to be.

Forcing down her panic, she blinked into the burning smoke to try to locate the window. She finally caught a glimpse of something squarish and dark, but when she pitched forward to start crawling for it, her hand landed in something warm and wet. She held it up to the orange glow and saw black blood glistening on her palm.

“No.”
Clarke doubled over, hands scrambling over the wet floorboards for any sign of Lexa, but she found nothing but more sticky blood.

“No.” She wanted to wretch. “Lexa. Lexa!”

She couldn’t see hear anything but the crackle of fire. She couldn’t see anything beyond her own nose. She couldn’t even tell if Lexa was here, never mind do anything to help her.

Then, finally, she heard a shout. “Clarke?”

Her head whipped around. “Lexa!”

The voice had come from the glowing doorway. The reeds there were beginning to smolder, but Clarke surged toward them anyway. She coughed through the smoke until tears streamed down her face, but no matter how fast she crawled, she never seemed to get closer to the door. Before she could reach it, it went up in a blaze.

“Clarke!”

Suddenly, the flames were everywhere. They licked at her skin and ate away the reeds, then began to incinerate the very walls that surrounded her. The heat was unearthly. Clarke’s skin began to bubble, and she couldn’t see or breathe, but she pushed forward toward the sound of Lexa’s voice.

She knew she wasn’t going to survive this, but there was still a chance she could get to Lexa before they were both engulfed. A chance she could see the alpha one last time.

Just a little farther, and she’d make it.

She panted through the smoke of her own burning hair.

Just a few more inches, and they’d be together.

She wheezed until her lungs began to wither and peel.

Just—

With a gasp, Clarke sat up.

Her eyes no longer stung, and she cast them frantically about the room. It wasn’t nighttime, but morning, and the air was clear and crisp. She drew heaving lungfuls of it, scraping frantically at her blood-soaked arms.

They were dry. There wasn’t a drop of spilled blood in the room, nor a trace of smoke in the air.

Disoriented, she looked down to find Lexa lying beside her on the mattress. The alpha had shifted into a horizontal position sometime after they’d fallen asleep, but she was there. Not hurt. Not burned. Not even awake.

It was a nightmare, Clarke realized. That was all.

Judging by the gray morning sunlight that peeked in from the edges of the small window, they had been asleep for almost an entire day and night. That wasn’t surprising for Lexa, whose body was still healing. But what was Clarke’s excuse?

She focused on drawing one shaky breath, then another. But the more the cool air soothed her lungs, the more obvious it became that her insides still felt like they were being scorched.
Clarke’s eyes widened. This was something more than another bad dream. This was something really wrong.

Not with Lexa… with her.

The phantom flames might have vanished, but Clarke could still feel them licking at her skin. The linens beneath her were damp with sweat, and her clothes felt like they’d been sewn from fiery sandpaper. Most damning of all was the empty ache low in her belly, and the way she couldn’t seem to focus on anything but the dark, intoxicating scent of the sleeping alpha at her side.

Even as Clarke shifted on the bed, Lexa’s raspy breaths remained slow and even. There was only one sign that her subconscious was aware of anything amiss: the sheet tented tall and proud between her legs.

Clarke opened her mouth to curse, but an involuntary whine came out instead.

She pushed off the mattress and shifted away from Lexa before she could do something rash—like rip her blankets away and mount her like an animal. The thought alone made Clarke shudder and salivate, and she squeezed her eyes shut against the image. The fire in the hut might have been a figment of her imagination, but the one inside her was becoming entirely too real.

She didn’t understand how this had happened. It was weeks from when her heat was supposed to arrive, and even if her body had bucked a traditional schedule thanks to being suppressed for four years, there still should have been a couple warning days of hunger and sleep as her body stockpiled energy for what was to come. Days when she would have known what was about to happen, thanks to that first heat out in the wilderness, but would still have had time to prepare. Instead, one loaf of brown bread and an extended nap later, and Clarke was already too far gone to stop it. She didn’t need her mother’s medical degree to know she would never make it to Polis or Arkadia in time for suppressants to be of any use.

Clarke’s mind felt sluggish, but she had to think. She was still in the preliminary stages of her cycle, which meant she had a little more time before the worst overcame her. A little while longer to figure out what to do.

Don’t think, her inner omega whispered. Just do.

For the first time ever during a heat, she had a powerful alpha at her side who was willing and able to give her what she craved. What could there possibly be to think about?

Clarke clenched her eyes shut and ground the heels of her hands against them, willing herself to come under control.

The omega inside her was wrong. Lexa might have been willing, but she certainly wasn’t able. At least not without risking the precarious recovery that every single person in this hut had fought so hard for—most of all Lexa herself.

Clarke knew from her health readers on the Ark that an omega’s heat could be almost as physically demanding for an alpha as it was for the omega. If she let her urges take over, she and Lexa would be entwined for days. Lexa’s strength and stamina would be pushed far past their current breaking points, and this time it could be Clarke’s biology to blame for the commander’s undoing, not Titus’s bullet.

Lexa might not consider herself Heda anymore, but Clarke knew her survival was the key to an entire civilization’s future—not to mention her own sanity and happiness. She wouldn’t put the
alpha’s safety at risk for anything, not even herself.

Besides, she had to think of where they were. This was Felia’s house. Had been Costia’s house, years ago. And while this bedroom had never belonged to Lexa’s last love—it had been Felia’s, and then had sat empty after the woman moved into her late daughter’s room—the thought of repaying the older omega’s hospitality by defiling part of her home made Clarke feel queasy.

And yet… if Lexa didn’t claim her, her body would keep calling out for an alpha who would. The scent of an unmated omega in heat was overpowering and pervasive. If it hadn’t already escaped the hut, it would soon. Unmated alphas from all over the village would smell her unwitting call and arrive at Felia’s doorstep. They would vie for the right to knot her—to mate her—and there would only be so much that Trikru self-control and Felia’s knife could do to protect her.

When one of those alphas inevitably reached out to touch her—Clarke shivered, and her stomach turned when she realized it wasn’t entirely in disgust—Lexa would snap. She would reveal herself, and she would fight. And in her current state, she would probably die.

Clarke’s only choice—and Lexa’s only chance—was for her to get as far away from here as possible.

She stood on shaky legs, wincing as she felt the already-damp fabric between her thighs. Based on her first and last experience with an unsuppressed heat, this was nothing compared to what would come. She discarded her borrowed Trikru pajama pants and pulled on her own dry jeans instead, the ones Felia had so kindly laundered. She tried to focus on their soapy, earthy scent, and not the way the denim chafed her sensitive skin.

Clarke staggered toward the reeds of the doorway, forcing herself to take deep breaths through her mouth. The Grounders had ways of dealing with this sort of thing, she knew. They had caves and compounds where unmated omegas could go—Lincoln had told her about them once. All she had to do was get to one. The betas there could protect her, and she could ride out her heat in solitary agony. In a few days, when she had control of herself again, she could return here.

It would take every shred of her strength to leave Lexa after all that had happened, but if it meant saving the alpha’s life, Clarke could do it.

With a final longing glance at the sleeping commander, she slipped through the thick reeds and into Felia’s main room. Her womb clenched painfully at the loss of Lexa’s scent, but she willed herself to focus.

Felia was crouched next to the fire beside Octavia, who looked the opposite of how Clarke felt. Octavia’s cheeks were wan and dry as she slept beneath the furs Felia must have piled atop her, and she shivered not with fever, like Clarke, but with cold.

Felia stood up the moment she caught sight of Clarke’s disheveled state. After a single sniff of the pheromone-charged air, her eyes widened.

“I—‘ Clarke choked off, her cheeks burning with need and embarrassment.

The older omega hurried to her side. “Oh, goufa.” The displeasure she’d shown after Clarke had sent Octavia to Polis was gone. There was nothing but tenderness in her hands now, and she reached up to tuck Clarke’s sweaty hair behind her ear.

Clarke suddenly felt the need to explain herself. To explain why she had let her cursed omega hormones put Lexa and everyone else in the hut at risk. “I didn’t see the signs,” she said, voice
cracking. She was getting dizzy, and her emotions felt even more so. She couldn’t seem to temper them, which only made her feel more flustered. “Last time it took so long to start. I was so hungry, a- and I slept all the time, and— I should have known, but I didn’t. I swear. I just woke up, and—“

“Shh. *Hosh yu daun,*” Felia said gently. “Take this off. You will feel better.” She tugged at the hem of Clarke’s outermost shirt, and Clarke obediently slipped it over her head.

When she was left in only her tank top, Clarke discovered the older woman was right. Warm as it must have felt to Felia, the air in the fire room was like an icy breeze against Clarke’s hot skin. It raised goosebumps on her arms and cleared some of the fog from her mind.

“You are still young, and the signs will become easier to tell with time,” Felia soothed. “Sometimes it happens this way. If a powerful alpha is very close, this can trigger a reaction. Heat can come sudden and fast.” She squeezed Clarke’s sweaty hand, then smiled conspiratorially. “When in doubt, *strikon,* remember it is always the alpha’s fault.”

Clarke managed a short, miserable laugh. “I’ll be sure to tell her that later.”

“Come, sit down.”

“No, I can’t. I—”

“You have to go,” Felia finished. She had deduced right away what it had taken Clarke’s muddled brain several minutes to figure out in Lexa’s room. “*Sha,* I know. Nyko will take you to the caves. But Nyko is across the river at the market to collect supplies for your friend. So you will sit, and I will fetch him.”

Clarke nodded, shoulders sagging in relief. Lincoln had been right. There was somewhere safe that omegas from Burou could go, and Felia thought she and Nyko still had time to make it there.

As the older omega slipped from the hut, Clarke slumped down to wait beside the wooden front door. Felia hadn’t needed to tell her it would be too dangerous to set out for the caves alone. Even if Clarke knew the way, the village alphas would smell her impending heat and flock to it. And without a level-headed companion, there was an all-too-real chance that she might accept their advances. The thought of it made her sick, but the more time that passed, the closer her body’s needs would come to overpowering her reason and her heart.

Lying with an omega without consent was a capital crime across the Coalition, but consent was hardly difficult to obtain from an omega in heat. If Clarke went out alone and said yes to some strange alpha, it was hard to say whether any amount of well-intentioned self-discipline would keep that alpha from trying to lead her to the nearest bed. She would be asked afterwards if her consent had been true, and the alpha would be doomed when she said no—but by then it would be far too late.

In an ideal world, it would have been a relative who escorted her to the caves. A family member’s right to speak on her behalf was less likely to be questioned—and the more powerful the relative, the better. But with Abby miles away in Polis, Nyko was her best bet. He was big and strong and respected by his clan, and he was dominant for a beta. Clarke knew he could keep her safe.

So she waited.

And waited.

And waited.
Hours seemed to pass, though deep down Clarke knew it couldn’t have been longer than a few minutes. Still, her heat was getting worse by the second. If she had mourned the loss of Lexa’s scent before, it seemed to assault her now. Her senses had sharpened, and she could smell alpha musk emanating from every fiber of her clothing that had ever touched Lexa’s skin. She could smell herself, too—her desperation and her embarrassing arousal.

The hollow clenching in her core had gone from annoying to uncomfortable to excruciating. The doctor in Clarke knew it was just her body trying to prepare itself for a pregnancy, but the omega in her wanted to howl for Lexa until the alpha came and fucked her until she screamed.

Without her permission, her mind flashed back to that fateful day in Lexa’s bedroom, hours before the unthinkable had happened. She could see herself stepping into the alpha’s personal space, and the way Lexa’s breath had caught, her eyes wide and disbelieving. She could feel her heart flutter, and the warmth of dozens of candles, and the afternoon breeze from the windows brushing her cheek. And she could smell the way the Lexa’s scent had changed the second Clarke leaned in to kiss her.

It was that shift in pheromones—from distressed and resigned to nervous and hopeful—that had given Clarke the courage to keep going.

She had reached up and unclasped Lexa’s top with expert fingers, as if she’d undressed the commander every day for years. In reality, she’d just practiced it in her mind more times than she could count.

Lexa had blinked reverently up at her as she urged them back onto the bed, but she didn’t speak. Clarke was single-minded as she peeled her shirt the rest of the way down, revealing pert, perfect breasts. She slipped her thigh between the alpha’s legs and relished the way Lexa’s center burned her through her jeans.

Clarke, Lexa had said then.

Clarke couldn’t tell if it was a plea, or a warning, or a hundred thousand questions rolled into one. She had kissed Lexa harder than ever, begging the alpha’s body to hear the words she could not yet say.

She wanted to touch Lexa everywhere, discover every inch of her skin, but her lingering nerves kept her from diving in head-first. Instead she pulled back a few inches, studying Lexa’s flushed face.

Clarke had shared a frenzied romp with Finn and a few lonely nights with Niylah, and… that was it. That was the sum total of her sexual experience, on or off the Ark. Lexa was older, and an alpha, and she had been with Costia for years. She probably knew things about sex that Clarke didn’t even know she didn’t know.

What if, after all these months of longing, she wasn’t able to do what Lexa liked? What if she wasn’t able to articulate what she liked? What did she like? What if she was too loud, or not loud enough? Too eager, or not eager enough? What if she embarrassed herself, or Lexa, or them both?

As the seconds ticked by, punctuated only by her heavy breathing, Clarke half-expected the alpha below her to flip them over and grind her hips into the bed. It would have been a relief, in a way, for the next move to be taken out of her hands. But Lexa remained trembly still against the pillows, waiting for her to take the lead.

“I have not—“ Lexa started, then swallowed. “I haven’t… since Costia. Not with someone I…”

The hesitant confession made Clarke’s heart swell, and her growing fears retreated to the back of her
mind. She’d been so busy worrying about her own potential shortcomings that it hadn’t even occurred to her that Lexa might be just as nervous as she was.

She exhaled, feeling silly. Of course the woman beneath her wasn’t some strutting alpha stud, waiting for Clarke to perform for her. She was Lexa.

“It’s okay,” Clarke had whispered, glancing between Lexa’s anxious eyes. “We’ll go slow, okay?”

And they did—for a time. They languished together on the furs, kissing and nudging and exploring, denim against denim and skin against skin, until Clarke couldn’t take slow any longer. And judging by the fire building in Lexa’s gaze, the alpha couldn’t either.

Lexa did roll them over then, and she hovered above Clarke with stars in her eyes. There was a question on her face, and Clarke answered it with a jerky, fervent nod.

“I’m sure,” Clarke panted, already breathless.

The alpha pressed a smoldering kiss to Clarke’s jaw, then her throat, then trailed her full lips downwards along the deep vee of Clarke’s threadbare shirt. Clarke tangled her fingers into the soft baby curls at her nape, unable to decide if she wanted those lips to come back up and kiss her or to keep making their way down, down, down.

Lexa nudged the hem of her shirt up with her nose, clearly intent on ghosting her lips over every inch of skin she uncovered along the way. Clarke shivered at the featherlight touches, but she couldn’t stand to wait any longer. She yanked the fabric upwards, squirming as she wrangled it over her shoulders and down her arms.

Lexa leaned back, her mouth quirking. “I was under the impression that was my job.”

“Yeah, well.” Clarke had intended to grin slyly, to continue the flirtatious game, but the raw joy of the moment overcame her. Her mouth split into a wide, guileless smile. “Too slow.”

Lexa laughed, radiant and alive, and Clarke’s breath stopped short. The weight of her responsibility to her people, of Jus drein nou jus daun, of the blockade she was getting closer to breaking with every second—all of it seemed to lift from her shoulders. There was only Lexa now, looking younger than Clarke had ever seen, and her own daring heart pounding in her chest.

She had known, even then, that she would never see anything more beautiful than this. That there would never be a sight more stunning than Lexa kneeling between her thighs, passionate and vulnerable and so, so happy.

Now, alone on the floor of Felia’s hut, Clarke replayed those hallowed moments—and the ones that came after—over and over and over again. She had hoped they would ease her suffering, but the memories only seemed to make her need more acute.

With every minute that passed waiting for Nyko, it became harder to keep herself from crawling across Felia’s fire room and back to Lexa’s side. It didn’t matter how undignified that would normally make her feel, or how critical it was to her that the alpha think of her as an equal. In heat, all she cared about was reaching Lexa. Touching Lexa. Begging Lexa to—

“Griffin, you reek.”

Clarke’s head snapped up. She saw Octavia, staring bleary-eyed at her from beneath the mound of furs across the room. All at once, she realized she had fallen forward onto her hands and knees and had started crawling toward Lexa’s door.
“Like, seriously, take a shower.”

The raspy words startled some sense back into Clarke. She fell back to sit on her heels, squeezing her eyes shut. “Fuck.”

“Yeah,” Octavia drawled. “Or do that.”

Clarke groaned in frustration, shoving the memories of Polis from her mind. “I can’t, O. Lexa’s not strong enough. I have—I have to—”

She was cut off by the sound of linens rustling in Lexa’s room. She probably wouldn’t even have heard them under normal circumstances, but in heat the world seemed heightened. In heat, the alpha’s sleepy movements sounded like a death knell.

“—Go,” Clarke finished, scrambling to her feet. “Right now. I have to go.”

Lexa was waking up. If she smelled the telltale signs of heat and called out, Clarke knew her voice would be the straw that broke the camel’s back. Her resolve to stay away would crumble, and it would be Lexa who suffered the consequences.

“Tell Nyko I left for the caves,” Clarke said, hurrying for the front door.

Octavia raised her head a few inches from the floor, which seemed to be all she could manage. “What? No way. Clarke, you can’t go out there.”

“He’s close by,” said Clarke, with more confidence than she felt. *He had to be.* “He’ll catch up with me. I’ll be fine. Just—tell Lexa I’ll be fine, okay?”

She was Wanheda—she was *Clarke Griffin*—and she would not let her fears put her loved ones in jeopardy. It wasn’t difficult to deduce that the caves must be on the other side of the river, set into the one hill around Burou that would be high enough to easily defend the heat-stricken omegas inside. Clarke would head for the riverbank, and she would ask an omega or a beta for more specific directions when she got there. Nyko would find her at any minute. Maybe she would even intercept him at the water.

She would be fine.

“Clarke—”

She didn’t wait to hear what Octavia had to say. She couldn’t afford to. With a determined thrust of her jaw, she threw open the front door and stepped outside. She made it five paces from Felia’s front stoop before she realized she had made a terrible mistake.

The cool spring breeze brought comfort to Clarke’s overheated skin, but it also carried all the smells of Burou straight to her hyper-sensitive nose. Now there wasn’t just Lexa’s scent to contend with, but the scents of dozens of village alphas going about their lives. Dozens and dozens of dominant, virile alphas. Their pheromones were sharp and overpowering—nothing like Lexa’s clean, woody musk—but Clarke yearned for them all the same.

*The river,* she told herself. *She just had to make it to the river.*

She took a staggering step toward the riverbank, only to realize she wasn’t pointed toward the water at all. Without her permission, her feet had turned to face a nearby hut—and the alpha who was making his way out of it.
“Omega,” said the man, more a snarl than a greeting.

Clarke froze. “Stay back.”

The male alpha was twenty feet off, but edging closer. He seemed to have forgotten where he’d been going when he left his hut—or maybe he’d been headed for Clarke all along. Maybe the smell of her heat had already permeated the surrounding homes, and he was only the first of many to come looking for its source.

“Come inside,” he said, just short of a command. He was clearly struggling to keep his voice even. “I can help you.”

“I don’t need help,” Clarke said, as forcefully as her trembling voice would allow.

She took an uneasy step backwards, only to be engulfed in a cloud of powerful pheromones. She whirled around to find a second alpha, a woman, coming toward her from behind.

“Leave her alone,” the second alpha growled at the first.

Clarke was thankful for a moment, but her gratitude evaporated the second the female alpha looked at her. Her eyes were just as hungry as the man’s, if not more so.

“I have horses,” the alpha woman purred. “I catch more fish than anyone in the village.” She stroked her fist up and down the tall fishing spear she held at her side, and Clarke shivered. “I can take care of you better than he can, Sky girl.”

The first alpha huffed at this assessment. But before he could respond to the challenge, another alpha approached from a narrow path, then two more from around a lopsided hut.

“Gon yo we,” snapped the fisherwoman, angry that her perceived territory was being threatened.

More tense arguments in Trigedasleng followed—who had the biggest hut, the most prominent family, the best prospects in the Trikru army. Who was tallest, who was strongest, who had the biggest dick. Had Clarke not been so terrified, she would have laughed.

If her own scent wasn’t enough to attract every unmated alpha this side of the river, she knew the growing fog of alpha pheromones would be. Alphas just couldn’t seem to help themselves. Wherever a conflict arose between a few of them, more always seemed to appear, keen to toss their hats into the ring. Clarke had seen it happen all the time on the Ark over food, or medicine, or audiences with the Council. Only this time the prize was her.

No matter which direction Clarke turned, another eager alpha popped up to block her way to the river. They came from the huts, from the communal cook fire, from the fish stands by the riverbank. Their harsh scents clogged her nose and muddied her thoughts.

She stumbled sideways, adrift and overwhelmed. She wasn’t far from Felia’s hut—not even out of sight—but which way was it?

“I can’t— I don’t want—”

Except part of Clarke did want. Her jeans flooded at the thought of all these alphas dominating one another for the right to claim her. Her head spun at each growl, each threat—and soon, at each shove and jab. As she watched their grappling hands—some big and rough, some sleek and scarred, but all powerful—she couldn’t help but imagine those hands on her body, ripping off her scratchy clothes, pushing her legs apart…
The first drops of red blood sprayed from an alpha’s nose onto the sandy ground, and the disturbing images were jolted from Clarke’s mind.

“Em pleni!” she shouted.

Her angry cry seemed to melt into the scuffles around her. There were more alphas now—those dozens she had so foolishly fantasized about, here in the flesh. Alone, any one of them should have been able to keep control and bow out gracefully when Clarke declined their advances. Together, pitted against one another, they were feral and furious.

Ironically, it was their war with each other that was keeping her safe—and trapped—in the center of the crowd. Each time an alpha crossed the shrinking circle of empty space around her, another jerked the first aside to take their place—and then another jerked them aside. An omega’s heat brought out alphas’ instincts to protect as well as their urges to dominate and take, and the warring impulses were playing out in a bloody pageant all around her.

Soon, a handful of betas emerged from the nearby homes. They shouted for order and pumped out neutral pheromones to ease the tension, but their efforts went mostly unacknowledged. Through the fleeting gaps in the crowd, Clarke could see the judgment on their faces as plainly as their worry. They thought the alphas of their village were going to tear each other apart. They feared they would lose their brothers and sisters and sons and daughters, and it would all be some irresponsible Sky girl’s fault.

At last, a large, calloused hand got close enough to grab Clarke’s forearm. She groaned at the rough contact on her feverish skin, then shook her head desperately to clear it. She tried to wrench free, but her heat made her weak and pliable.

It would have been easier to fall at the alpha’s feet than to deny him anything, and she was dangerously close to doing just that—until she realized the man who’d grabbed her wasn’t an alpha at all.

“Nyko!”

“Wanheda,” he panted, still half-tangled in the fighting.

Behind him were two other betas, both men, who were holding the alphas off long enough for Nyko to squeeze closer. They were dressed differently than the other villagers, like soldiers heading off to battle, and Clarke realized they must be the warriors Indra had sent here from Polis with Octavia. She wanted to scream at them to return to Felia’s hut, but they had no idea that the person they were here to protect was still inside.

“Take my hand,” Nyko said.

The crowd was thinning as some of the weaker alphas withdrew. A handful more had slunk back at the mention of Clarke’s title, showing their throats, and the reprieve was enough to reveal a path through the crowd and toward the riverbank.

“Where’s Felia?” Clarke asked.

“Beating alphas over the head. Now come.”

Nyko gripped her hand the way Bellamy had held Octavia’s time and again, but the alphas who remained didn’t seem to see it that way. Growls of fury rose up at the idea that this newcomer—this beta—would dare try to claim the omega they each saw as theirs.
As quickly as the path to the river had opened, it closed again. And as suddenly as Nyko had grabbed Clarke, his fingers slipped from hers.

Clarke shouted as a light-haired alpha jerked him back into the fray. Nyko held his own as the woman threw her weight and her pheromones at him, but Clarke knew he would never be able to help her get to the river while he was using all his strength just to stay upright.

She backed away on trembling legs, trying and failing not to let her panic show. Her calves collided with something hard, and she toppled backwards—right onto the platform of Felia’s hut. She exhaled in relief, but it came out more like a moan. If she couldn’t get to the caves, at least she could get back inside. All she had to do was scoot sideways toward the door, and stretch up high, and grab the handle, and…

What?

What would she do then?

Clarke froze, leaning back on her elbows. The alphas weren’t going to stop pressing their claims just because a slab of wood separated them from her. And when they eventually broke through Felia’s front door, they wouldn’t just find Clarke. They would find Lexa. And Lexa would find a challenge she couldn’t possibly win.

Out of the corner of her eye, Clarke saw one alpha break free from the mass. It was the first man who’d approached her, and he staggered toward her again now. He seemed to have taken her prone position as an invitation, for all at once he was nearly horizontal above her, his toes dug into the earth and his hands planted on the platform on either side of her bare shoulders. He didn’t touch her, but she could feel him everywhere—his breath on her face, his scent in her nostrils, his hot skin just inches above her own.

“Yu ste ait nau,” he soothed, his voice low. His knee nudged hers, and Clarke cried out. Finally, finally an alpha was touching her.

She didn’t recognize this man, but the omega inside her wailed that it didn’t matter. She needed to be knotted—needed to be *bred*—and part of her didn’t care who did it. Maybe they would all do it, all these alphas, maybe they would all fuck her and fight for her and fuck her some more. Maybe it would be better than getting away. Maybe she would like it.

Maybe it would keep Lexa safe.

At the thought of the alpha she actually wanted—the alpha *all* of her wanted—Clarke was torn from her downward spiral of need.

“Stop,” she growled, shoving at the man’s chest. “Get off!”

The alpha withdrew far enough to blink at her in confusion—and, for a brief second, alarm. Then he inhaled, and his eyes turned frenzied and unfocused once more. He was about to drop his weight onto Clarke’s body when a resounding roar ripped through the air overhead.

Felia’s front door crashed open, ricocheting against the inner wall so hard that the hut seemed to shake. Clarke craned her neck to find Lexa standing above her in the doorway, tall and ferocious and absolutely fucking livid. Her eyes blazed in a way Clarke had never seen—a way that made her quake with desire as much as with tearful relief.

Lexa stood barefoot in nothing but the tight gray shorts she’d worn while she slept, now stretched thin over the bulge between her tan legs. Her hair was rumpled from weeks of bed rest, but neither
her nakedness nor the scar on her stomach diminished the power and rage that rippled from her body. Somehow, Lexa had found the strength to stand when hours ago she could barely sit up. The doctor in Clarke should have been worried, but the doctor wasn’t in charge anymore—and all Clarke felt was wet.

The alpha man who’d hovered above her tumbled backwards into the mud, scuttling away like an insect afraid to be squashed. Others in the crowd sank to their knees, showing their throats as Lexa yanked unwilling submission from them. Hushed, confused shouts rose up from the agitated alphas and the betas who’d been trying to calm them.

“Heda!”

“Keryon!”

“A ghost!”

“Be gone or feel the wrath of your commander,” Lexa boomed. Her voice sliced the air like a sword strike, reverberating across the village as though it would flatten every hut in sight.

If Clarke hadn’t already fallen, she would have then. She wanted to say something to Lexa—anything that would assure her she was okay—but all she could manage was a whimper.

Alphas and betas alike got to their feet and scrambled away from the hut, and Clarke finally glimpsed Nyko and Felia between the bodies. They were both holding knives and breathing heavily, but they seemed uninjured. They, too, were backing away from the thunderstorm of alpha pheromones coming from the hut. She thought she saw Felia catch Lexa’s eye, then nod.

“Klark,” Lexa growled, the syllable sharp in her native tongue.

Clarke’s disoriented gaze snapped up. Lexa was finally looking at her, her chest heaving with anger. Clarke knew the rage wasn’t directed at her, but it made her sweat all the same.

Lexa stepped aside to make a space for her in the open doorway. Despite the overwhelming force of her presence, Clarke saw a question flicker in her green eyes. She wasn’t ordering Clarke in; she was inviting her. And she wasn’t entirely sure Clarke would say yes.

Clarke’s voice broke. “Lexa, please.”

In an instant, Lexa had lifted her from the stoop. The alpha’s hands were electric on her burning skin, and Clarke couldn’t hold back the ecstatic cry that escaped her lips. She clung to Lexa’s neck as Lexa whisked her through the doorway of the hut, sucking in great lungfuls of the potent scent there.

She knew now that she had been a fool to think any other alpha would be able to give her what she craved. That any of them could hold her the way Lexa did, touch her the way Lexa did, make her feel safe the way Lexa did, make her ache the way Lexa did.

This… this scent, these hands, this woman… this was what she had needed all along.

This was who she needed.

Then, now, and always.
I'm back on Tumblr after a long, long hiatus--come chat with me and show me the best Clexa blogs to follow!

_Goufa_ - child  
_Hosh yu daun_ - hush, quiet down  
_Strikon_ - little one  
_Sha_ - yes  
_Jus drein nou jus daun_ - blood must not have blood  
_Gon yo we_ - go away  
_Empleni_ - enough  
_Yu ste ait nau_ - you’re okay now  
_Keryon_ - spirit(s)
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Clarke and Lexa grapple with the consequences of their reunion.

Chapter Notes

Hi friends! Would you guys be interested in reading occasional one-shots that are set in this world but don't fall within the main timeline? I've been thinking about writing a short companion piece about Clarke and Lexa's first time together in Polis. Let me know!

Many thanks to the awesome Slakgedakru for help with the translations throughout this story, and especially in this chapter. Mochof!

With Clarke in her arms, Lexa unleashed a final growl at the alphas and betas scrambling away outside Felia’s hut. She didn’t spare them another glance before she caught the front door with her bare heel and slammed it shut behind her.

Clarke didn’t know where Lexa had found the strength to stand, let alone lift her up from the stoop and whisk her inside. And she couldn’t seem to remember why she should care.

In the fog of her heat, Lexa’s hands on her body were all she could think about. Every cell in Lexa seemed to vibrate with rage at the scene she’d found outside, but her fingers were feather-light on Clarke’s skin as she stalked through the fire room past Octavia, who’d fallen back to sleep, and into what had become their bedroom. She deposited Clarke in the center of the straw mattress, then followed her down onto it. Lexa knelt over her, her knees on either side of Clarke’s own.

The omega inside Clarke preened as she basked in what was about to happen—until she realized Lexa was not looking at her the same way she was looking at Lexa.

Lexa’s face was not full of unhinged lust, as Clarke knew her own must be. It was frantic with fear.

“Where are you hurt?” Lexa asked. Eyes wide, her fingers brushed over Clarke’s temples, down the sides of her face, and along her bare arms. She turned Clarke’s hands over in hers, then nudged at her ribs.

Every touch made a trail of fire burn beneath Clarke’s skin and her nipples tighten into aching points. She struggled to catch her breath. “Nowhere. Lexa, I need…”

Lexa didn’t seem to hear her. She was single-minded in her search for injuries. Her muscles were strung as tightly as a Grounder bow, and Clarke could practically see the war for control being waged inside her body.
Lexa’s alpha instincts must have been screeching at her to tear off Clarke’s jeans and take her, but Lexa wasn’t letting her alpha win. She wasn’t letting go. Clarke would have been impressed by her self-control if it hadn’t been for the pulsing pain in her womb that obscured every other thought.

“Lexa, please. I…”

Clarke trailed off as the sounds of a skirmish seeped in from the closed bedroom window, followed by the faint scent of unknown alphas. Despite Lexa’s display outside, it seemed that a few of the boldest competitors still hoped to claim Clarke’s heat for their own.

Lexa must have caught their scent, too, for her head snapped up. Her eyes were livid. She roared at the window—a deep, animalistic sound—and the room seemed to shake with her dominant pheromones.

Mine, she was saying.

Clarke whimpered, wetness spilling between her legs. At last, the alpha in Lexa had risen to the surface. Finally, Clarke would get what she so feverishly desired.

But when the would-be intruders retreated and their scents faded, Lexa’s taut shoulders sagged. She had wrested herself back under control, and Clarke nearly howled with frustration.

“I am sorry, Clarke. I should have protected you.”

The quiet words of regret pierced her haze long enough to make her heart clench. She knew the lingering effects of Lexa’s injuries—the pain and exhaustion and clouded senses—had been eating her up inside. Lexa would never have slept through the start of Clarke’s heat if she’d been well, and they both knew it.

“You did protect me,” Clarke said gently. “I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t come outside when you did.”

Actually, she did know what might have happened—and now that she was safe with Lexa, it made her want to vomit. Lexa seemed to know, too, for the corner of her lip rose up in a snarl.

“I’m fine,” Clarke quickly assured her. The humid frenzy of her heat was slipping back in, but she found just enough strength to catch Lexa’s hand and press it low against her stomach. “See? Go ahead, check me for injuries.” Her eyes fluttered. She pushed Lexa’s hand downwards, towards the button of her jeans. Her empty womb throbbed below the alpha’s touch. “Check here.”

Lexa leveled a warning glare at her, but that only made her wetter. “Clarke.”

“Lexa,” she echoed.

Lexa’s chest heaved, and Clarke knew she wasn’t as steady as she was pretending. Her eyes were dark with arousal stirred by Clarke’s heat, and her erection looked ready to split the seam of her tight shorts. Her need was growing almost as acute as Clarke’s own, and it was obvious she was nearing the end of her rope.

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” Lexa said.

“Of course I do.”

In that moment, Clarke felt she had never known anything better. For the first time, she felt her mind and body were truly one. She wasn’t sense and sensibility. She wasn’t brain and biology. She just
“I’m asking for you.”

Somewhere deep down, she knew there were reasons why Lexa hesitated. She knew there were reasons why she should hesitate—she just didn’t care what they were anymore.

In one swift motion, she released Lexa’s hand and reached down to grip the bulge in her shorts. Before the agitated alpha could snap, Clarke showed her throat to offer her submission.

“Lexa, please.”

Something inside Lexa seemed to snap. She sprang to life, driving Clarke’s shoulders into the mattress and grinding their hips together.

Clarke nearly laughed with relief, but it turned into a strangled cry as Lexa’s groin found her center. Lexa released a flood of possessing pheromones into the small room, all over her and around her, and Clarke couldn’t get enough. She rocked hungrily against Lexa’s body, breathing deeply from the nucleus of alpha scent at the crook of her neck. The longer they moved together, though, the more her inner muscles began to ripple with jealousy. Until Lexa fucked her, she knew, each small reprieve would only give way to more need.

Clarke slipped her hands between their bodies to tug at Lexa’s shorts, but Lexa batted them away. When that didn’t stop her, Lexa pinned her wrists to the mattress.

“Keep them there,” Lexa said harshly.

Clarke would have balked at such a command when they’d slept together in Polis, but Lexa seemed to know that in heat the rough words would make her writhe—or maybe she was just furiously trying to maintain some measure of restraint. As much as Clarke wished Lexa would let go, she balled her fists at her sides. She was as desperate to please her alpha as she was to free the shaft that was rubbing maddeningly against her thigh.

Lexa didn’t seem to have any interest in removing her own skintight shorts, but she made quick work of Clarke’s tank top and soaked jeans.

Yes, Clarke thought, yes, yes, yes, yes.

Lexa breathed deeply into the balled-up denim, and her eyes went black. In a flash, she was doubled over between Clarke’s bare legs, lapping tenderly at the wetness that dripped from her overheated flesh.

“Lexa!”

Clarke jerked away from the shock of Lexa’s tongue on her hypersensitive clit, but her hand found the back of Lexa’s head and tugged her closer. The pleasure was overwhelming, and the frustration even more so. Lexa’s mouth was hungry and wet and made her thighs shake, but it wasn’t what she craved.

In the tower, Lexa had coaxed Clarke to come three times this way before she’d let the omega’s hands so much as wander below her waistband. She had wanted to be sure Clarke was ready, and then extra sure, and then sure again. She was a gentle and considerate lover, and Clarke had felt cherished from the first kiss to the last.

Today, though, she didn’t want to be cherished. She wanted to be taken, and filled, and used—and
she had never been more ready for anything in her life.

“I need you inside me,” she panted, fumbling to pull at Lexa’s shoulders, at her tussled hair. “Now. Inside. Please.”

Lexa kissed her way up Clarke’s naked body, until finally her lips found Clarke’s own. Clarke poured every boiling ounce of her desire into the kiss. At last, Lexa reached down to pull off her shorts. The stretchy fabric got caught on her shaft, and she sat back on her knees with a frustrated grunt to shimmy out of it.

When Lexa popped free, Clarke sucked in a gasp. She’d been intimidated by the size of Lexa’s cock that first time in the tower, but now it made her salivate. Lexa’s hand was fisted tightly around the base, and shiny droplets had already formed on the reddened tip.

Clarke stared, lost in thought about how it would feel inside her. Stretching her open. Filling her up. She let out a whine that sounded more like a sob.

“We can still stop, niron,” Lexa husked out, her knuckles white.

“What?” Panicked, Clarke’s gaze flashed to Lexa’s.

Lexa’s eyes were as glassy as her glistening lips, but a hint of nervousness had joined the arousal in them. Somehow, she had mistaken Clarke’s wonder for worry. “Niron,” she repeated. “It means—“

“I know what it means,” Clarke growled.

“We have not discussed heat, or the possibility of…”

Mating, Lexa was going to say. Clarke knew, because apart from Lexa splitting her open, the thought of the alpha’s teeth sinking into her throat was consuming her from the inside out.

A mating bite was more likely to occur during an omega’s heat or an alpha’s rut, when emotions ran high and hormones higher. Unlike knotting, which only changed an omega’s scent for a few days, a mating bite was forever. Lexa was right—they hadn’t talked about the possibility of any of these things. But she had also picked the absolute worst time to become infuriatingly chivalrous about it.

The last thing Clarke ever wanted to do was stop.

“Lexa,” she begged. “Fuck me.”

Lexa’s eyes flashed, and the worry in them was eclipsed. In an instant, she had positioned herself at Clarke’s entrance. One hand balanced her weight beside Clarke’s head, and the other gripped her shaft. Lexa dragged the stiff head from the curve of Clarke’s ass up to the hard point of her clit, smearing slick through her folds as if she weren’t already soaked.

“Yu gaf in bilaik ai na jok yu of?” she whispered tauntingly against the shell of Clarke’s ear. The velvety grip of authority had returned to her voice, and Clarke knew she had slipped back into the innate dominance of her alpha.

Clarke became a mess of panting cries. “Yes, I want it, Lexa, please, fuck me, fuck me, fuck m— ahh!”

All at once, Lexa was pushing inside. Clarke’s eyes rolled back at the sudden intrusion, but Lexa didn’t waver. She never paused, but grit her teeth as she inched her way past the tight, fluttering muscles of Clarke’s core.
When Clarke was spread all the way open—when the head of Lexa’s cock nudged against her womb—she jerked with a sudden, violent orgasm.

Finally, finally she was full.

Full of alpha.

Full of Lexa.

For a second she could think clearly, free of the haze of her heat. “Oh my god,” she whimpered, dragging the back of her hand across her sweaty forehead. Joyful tears leaked from her eyes. She was so happy to have Lexa here with her, alive with her, inside of her...

“Are you all right?” Lexa choked out, her breath coming in sharp puffs.

Clarke’s head lolled on the sheets. “Yesss.”

Her answer—or maybe her climax—eased the lingering uncertainty on Lexa’s face. Lexa drew back, inch by inch, until the head of her cock was stretching Clarke’s opening once more, then sank back in with a long, smooth stroke. Her body hummed with tension and power, and it only seemed to multiply with every slow roll of her hips.

Clarke’s hips rose to meet each measured thrust, the clarity of thought gifted by her involuntary orgasm quickly slipping away. Her inner muscles clamped down greedily each time Lexa pushed in, but her legs fell open, as if her body couldn’t decide whether it wanted to keep Lexa buried inside her forever, or to be pounded into the mattress until she screamed.

Clarke was only sure of one thing: it wasn’t just Lexa’s cock inside her that she needed. It was Lexa’s knot. Lexa’s come. Lexa’s seed.

She still had her birth control implant from the Ark in her arm, but it was close to expiring. Before her heat, she had worried about its diminishing efficacy. Now she longed for it to fail. Longed for Lexa to paint her womb with come and fill her with pups. To see her belly stretch and grow with their children.

It didn’t matter that Clarke didn’t feel anywhere near ready to be a mother, or that the world was on the brink of nuclear disaster—a disaster she was responsible for preventing. Her body wanted to be bred, and it was going to get what it wanted.

She spread her legs to draw Lexa in as they rocked together, and she let out an instinctive rush of omega scent. It was unfamiliar to her outside of heat, but even she could detect the cloying new aroma in the air. It was an invitation and an order. A proposal and a demand.

Lexa slammed forward with a growl, deeper even than before. The rhythm she set became fast and punishing, and Clarke rejoiced.

She arched up into Lexa’s chest, clutching at her arms. “More.”

Lexa obliged. Her brutal pace was contrasted by the soft Trigedasleng words she breathed into Clarke’s ear, barely intelligible and seemingly by accident. “Ain— ai skaifaya— ai hodnes— krei os —”

“Lexa.” It was the only word Clarke seemed to know anymore. “Lexa, Lexa, Lexa.”

Too soon, and without Clarke’s permission, Lexa’s thrusts became shallower. Clarke whined, her
muscles spasming as they fought against the loss—until she realized why her alpha was suddenly holding back.

With each jerk of Lexa’s hips, there was a new, heavy pressure at Clarke’s entrance. It was the beginning of the alpha’s knot—the swelling ring of flesh around the base of her cock that would fill Clarke up and tie their bodies together to prevent a single drop of Lexa’s seed from spilling free.

In short, it was everything her heat demanded—and the claim it implied was everything her heart craved.

This wasn’t the first time she’d encountered Lexa’s knot. It had formed that day in the tower, too. An alpha’s knot usually only appeared with an omega in heat, but intense emotion—good or bad—could also do the trick. Lexa had been embarrassed that day, and so, so careful not to push Clarke to take it, and Clarke had been too hesitant to admit she was curious, heat or no heat.

Back on the Ark, the idea of knotting had been a turn-off. Even when faced with the modestly sized anatomy that was illustrated in her health readers, Clarke had always wondered how that could ever fit in there. It was just another reason why alphas were too big and too imposing and too much, and why she’d been sure she would end up with a beta or an omega one day.

After she met Lexa, though, her assumptions about alphas had been dismantled one by one. She had grown to understand and appreciate the power that beat from Lexa’s very core, and to yearn for the strong, protective scent of her dominance. Lexa’s knot didn’t frighten her—it made her quake with desire. The thought of taking all of Lexa, all the way to the limit, was more than she could stand. She wanted everything Lexa could give her and more.

Her heat would never be fully sated, even temporarily, until that moment. No matter how many times Lexa shouted at the window, the alphas outside wouldn’t stop circling until her heat was claimed. Until she was claimed, even if it was only for now.

“Do it,” Clarke said, pulling Lexa closer. She reached down and dug her fingers into Lexa’s ass, trying to force the knot in.

Fire blazed in Lexa’s eyes. She leaned back far enough to pin Clarke’s frantic hips to the mattress. “Be still,” she growled.

The harsh order only made Clarke more desperate. She tried to buck upwards, fresh wetness gushing around Lexa’s cock, but Lexa had a vise-like grip on her hips. Clarke was left suspended in frenzied purgatory, torn between her desire to bend to Lexa’s will and her need for her alpha’s knot.

Lexa gave a few more shallow thrusts, ignoring Clarke’s anguish. Her movements were lazy, almost selfish—or calculated to appear so—but the rough treatment made the omega in Clarke sing. Only when Lexa seemed to have had enough of the quick friction did she finally push in a little further, then a little further still.

Clarke mewed each time the knot ground against her opening, reveling in the delicious, stinging stretch as it began to work its way inside. Lexa’s long fingers could hardly close around the hard ring, but Clarke knew she could take it. She could take it for Lexa. Her inner omega was chanting, begging, aching for it.

Lexa bent to pepper kisses across her chest and up her throat, but she didn’t let up. With each careful cant of her hips, she edged her knot further inside. She stretched Clarke open until she was crying out and squirming desperately against the arm that held her down.
“More,” Clarke whimpered, her legs falling wider than she knew they could go.

Just when she was sure Lexa’s knot would never fit inside her, the widest part slipped in with a wet pop. Her muscles sealed around it, and her vision went white. Her mouth opened in a silent scream as she came a second time, her head thrown to the side to bare her throat to Lexa’s bite.

As Clarke catapulted through space, the tension finally fled from her body. She felt as though she were back among the stars, floating and weightless, cognizant of nothing but the teeth clamped around the base of her neck and the thick bursts of come exploding against her womb.

It was many shuddering moments later that she began her slow return to Earth. She became aware of her own body first, heavy and limp on the straw mattress, then of Lexa draped possessively atop her. Her core clenched around the alpha’s knot as she recognized the feeling of Lexa’s lips suckling at her neck—and the coppery scent of blood.

“Oh my god,” she whispered hoarsely.

They had done it.

They had mated.

Clarke was torn between elation that she was Lexa’s—for real—for forever—and alarm at the monumental decision they had just made. Then she inhaled again, and she realized the blood she smelled was not her own.

When Lexa released her throat, Clarke’s fingers flew up to her neck. It was sore—bruised, probably—but the skin there was unbroken. She couldn’t explain the blood—until she saw Lexa lick a wisp of black from her own bottom lip.

“You didn’t bite me,” Clarke rasped. She didn’t know whether to feel mournful or relieved.

Lexa looked away. She swallowed once, then a second time, before turning her intense gaze back to Clarke. “I could not, Clarke. Not while you have so little control.”

Had Lexa told her this a few moments earlier, Clarke’s heat would have made her thrash and cry in disagreement. It would have made her get on her knees and beg Lexa to mate her anyway, no matter what. Now, with her heat temporarily vanquished, she understood. She was grateful for Lexa’s legendary self-discipline and proud of the way her alpha refused to take advantage of those more vulnerable than she.

Still, faint disappointment trickled through her chest. “Right. Of course.”

Lexa shifted her weight on her elbows, which were planted around Clarke’s shoulders. “I wanted to,” she confessed quietly.

With a soft swell of affection, Clarke leaned up to press their foreheads together. “I—I—” The movement made her aware of the shaft still buried deep inside her, and she shivered. The hint of a whine crept into her voice. “I wanted you to, too.”

Lexa’s cock twitched. Clarke groaned as another rope of come streamed out and expanded her belly, all of it sealed inside by the knot at her entrance. Lexa brushed a kiss over her pulse point, and a purr rumbled through her chest. “I know, niron.”

The quiet words weren’t a mating bite, nor even a promise of one, but they made Clarke sink back into the mattress and relax around Lexa’s knot, feeling warm and secure. Lexa did know her—knew
what she wanted and needed—and unlike the alphas Clarke had known on the Ark, Lexa would never use that knowledge against her. Even though she must have been aware of the immense power she wielded over Clarke’s body and heart, especially now, there was no victory or bravado in Lexa’s eyes—only love.

Blissful and content, Clarke smiled up at the alpha above her. She had a feeling she was seeing the real Lexa—and Lexa was seeing the real Clarke—for the first time since she’d woken up in a frenzy that morning.

Since she’d woken up in heat… and had done everything in her power to avoid ending up exactly where they were now.

As the reality of their situation crashed over her, the smile fell from Clarke’s face. All of a sudden, she realized love wasn’t the only thing she could see in Lexa’s eyes. There was exhaustion there, too—and terrible pain.

Clarke’s heart felt like it might stop. “Oh my god.”

Her gaze flew from Lexa’s face down her body, but she couldn’t see anything from her prone position on the mattress. Instead, she saw blood spilling from Lexa’s wound that night in the tower. She saw blackened furs and rusty scalpels. She saw tin mugs brimming with antibiotics just the day before.

“Lexa, you shouldn’t even be out of bed, never mind— And your stomach— Oh my god, your lungs—”

She pushed frantically at Lexa’s shoulders, trying to put enough space between them to see the scarred gunshot wound on her torso. Could the wetness she felt between their bodies be blood?

When she found Lexa unyielding, she attempted to wriggle sideways out from under her—only to yelp at a sudden sear of pain between her legs.

“Clarke!” Lexa’s sharp voice broke through her panic, and she realized this probably wasn’t the first time Lexa had said her name.

“I have to—“

“Stop moving. We’re tied.” Lexa panted with the effort of keeping Clarke’s hips pinned, only this time it was to hold her knot in, not keep it out. “You could be seriously injured if I withdraw,” she said through gritted teeth.

Clarke stilled under the warning, her core stinging, but it did little to stop the storm swirling in her chest. “You’re seriously injured, Lexa,” she snapped. “Right now.”

“I’m fine.” Lexa’s labored breathing and the dark circles under her eyes said otherwise.

“Can we roll over?”

“Clarke—”

“I have to check your wound.” The fear and frustration had her close to crying. “Please.”

Lexa glanced down between them. “I… don’t know,” she admitted. Color flared in her cheeks. “I have never done this before.”
Clarke had been ready to launch into another desperate argument, but Lexa’s shy confession made her stop short. She deflated, if only by a fraction. “I haven’t either,” she said softly.

Lexa’s gaze flicked to hers, her chest puffing out with poorly cloaked pride. Under other circumstances, Clarke would have rolled her eyes and laughed. With Lexa’s life hanging in the balance, all she could do was try to convince herself that the alpha couldn’t possibly be hurt too badly if she still had the energy to look so smug.

Clarke squeezed her biceps, three-quarters of the size they used to be. “We’ll try together, okay?”

It took several careful maneuvers and a close call that made Clarke wince, but at last Lexa fell back onto the bed with Clarke straddling her hips.

Clarke’s hands went straight to Lexa’s taut stomach, but the only liquid she found there was her own sweat and slick. She might have had the decency to blush, but she was too busy thanking every god and spirit she could name that it wasn’t blood. That Lexa’s wound was still closed.

She let out a long, deep breath, and it felt like the weight of the world went with it.

“Satisfied?” Lexa asked drily.

Clarke was not. “There’s still your pneumonia,” she said, starting to mentally catalogue all the reasons why she had tried so hard to spare Lexa from her heat. “And just because you’re not bleeding externally doesn’t mean there isn’t any damage on the inside.”

Lexa sighed. “Clarke, nothing is wrong.”

Clarke hardly heard the protest, so focused was she on trying to recall everything she’d ever learned about alphas and omegas from her mother’s medical tablet. “My heat pheromones would have triggered chemical surges in your brain. Dopamine, adrenaline. They don’t make you better, they just make you feel better. The pain is suppressed, but it isn’t gone. And—” She remembered something that had seemed like a flickering figment of her heat, but she knew now was all too real. “Oh my god, you came outside. Lexa. The whole town knows you’re alive.”

“Clarke—”

“Someone could be on the way from Polis right now to assassinate you, and look at us.” Clarke gestured frantically between their bodies, which she knew could be tied together for the better part of an hour. “You—”

“I am no longer Heda,” Lexa interrupted, obviously trying to reassure her. “No matter what I called myself outside, the people know this. They know I fell in Polis. They wait for a leader, but not for me.”

Clarke thought Lexa was wrong about that, whether their people were aware of it or not. But she took a different tack. “Even if you don’t have the Flame, you could still be seen as a threat.”

“Then we are lucky it would take nearly a day for word to reach Polis, and another day for danger to return.”

Lexa sounded as off-handed as she had before her fight to the death with Roan, and it made Clarke want to scream. “But—”

“What’s done is done,” Lexa said, squeezing her hip. “If you are right about the… chemicals, then your heat lends me strength. If an attack comes now, I will be better equipped than I was before.”
Clarke could not bring herself to agree, but Lexa had a point. Injured or not, an alpha was never so vicious as when protecting her omega during heat. Clarke could only hope Lexa would defend herself just as staunchly.

“Clarke.” Lexa caught her hands, which she had subconsciously begun to wring. “It is futile to worry about what has not yet come to pass.”

“Yeah, exactly—not *yet*. This isn’t the end of my heat, Lexa. You’re not strong enough.”

Lexa answered with a small roll of her hips. They could hardly move, tied as they were, but it was enough to make Clarke moan and the muscles inside her quiver. Lexa cocked an eyebrow. “I’m not, am I?”

Clarke glared down at her, short of breath. “This isn’t funny. What if I get you killed?”

Again.

“You didn’t. And you won’t,” Lexa said simply. She traced one of Clarke’s ribs with her thumb, looking conflicted. She seemed to struggle to find the words she wanted. When she did, her voice was softer than before. “I am not oblivious, Clarke. I know I am unwell. But for the first time since I awoke, I feel closer to how I should.”

“You mean like an alpha.” The evidence of that was still buried between Clarke’s legs, pulsing against her womb.


Clarke’s heart clenched. She studied Lexa’s face—not only the pain in her eyes, but the light in them, too. She had nearly forgotten how brilliant it could be.

“I will tell you if I become tired,” Lexa said. Clarke raised one eyebrow, and Lexa pursed her lips. “I will tell you if I become *more* tired,” she corrected, nostrils flaring. “We will go slowly, and we will stop if we need to.”

Lexa spoke with smooth authority, so unlike someone who’d been clutched by death only days before. Her voice cloaked Clarke in cool velvet, and the omega’s slumbering heat—now blinking awake—whispered at her to let go. To hand herself over and let her fears fall at her alpha’s feet, like an omega was supposed to.

“If you are so fearful for my stamina, we can certainly continue like this,” Lexa said, folding one arm behind her head. With a glimmer in her eyes, she nudged her hips upwards again.

It was only a quick, short movement, but to Clarke it felt like an earthquake. Before she could tremble and gasp at the size of the knot moving inside her, the pad of Lexa’s thumb found her clit.

Her head fell forward, blonde hair dangling in a curtain around her face. “Lexa—”

“Shh,” Lexa soothed. With her free hand, she tucked a twist of hair behind Clarke’s ear. “You have cared for me, Clarke. Now let me do the same for you.”
Hours later, Lexa’s artificial surge of energy was finally spent. She fell asleep beneath Clarke with a yawn and a crackling cough, tied together for the fourth time.

Clarke bit her bottom lip, holding back an awed smile as she stared down at Lexa’s fluttering eyelashes. It was almost impossible to believe they were here. That Lexa’s warm body was beneath her own, battered but unbroken.

She ghosted her fingers over Lexa’s pulse point, crouched over to listen to her lungs, and prodded gently at her scar in the candlelight, but she could find no evidence that their coupling had caused damage beyond the obvious exhaustion. As usual, Lexa was so much stronger than Clarke had given her credit for.

Clarke’s heart swelled at the thought, even as she worried that her unexpected heat might still be Lexa’s undoing.

No matter how warm and full and satisfied she felt now, this brief lull was far from the end. The fire in her veins would return sooner than later, and she would be a useless protector to Lexa while she was writhing on the mattress, begging the alpha to fuck her. Even if no enemies came, Clarke still didn’t know how she would ensure that Lexa took her medicine each day or got enough to eat—or how she would ever find the words to apologize to Felia for desecrating her hut like this.

For now, though—water.

When Lexa’s knot shrank enough to let them separate, Clarke held her breath and carefully lifted off the softening shaft. Her cheeks warmed at the veritable flood of come—Lexa’s and her own—that spilled out between their bodies, despite being the only one awake to see it.

She wiped herself clean with a corner of the sheet, then stood on shaky legs and tiptoed across the room to the jug of water she’d left there the day before. The air was heavy with pheromones and sex, and the water tasted cool and refreshing on her swollen lips.

On her way back to bed, she paused at the window. It was only a small square, not even close to big enough for a person to crawl through, but Felia and Nyko had kept it latched in fear that a passing neighbor might peek in and discover Lexa inside. Now that the secret was out, Clarke couldn’t see the harm in cracking the shutters for a minute. The stuffy room was in desperate need of a breeze, and a gulp of fresh air might help her keep her senses long enough to let Lexa rest for a couple hours.

She set the water jug down on the stool below the window and unhooked the rudimentary latch. When she pulled the shutters open, a gust of cool nighttime air greeted her—and on it, the barbed scent of strange alphas.

Clarke staggered back a step, her knees trembling. Before they could buckle under the sudden assault on her heat-heightened senses, a furious Lexa was awake and out of bed, engulfing Clarke in a cloud of her own pheromones.

Lexa stepped in front of her, facing the window. She’d been a jumble of slack limbs and soft kisses before she’d fallen asleep, but now she looked like steel.

Clarke peered around Lexa to count at least a dozen alphas standing in the darkness outside the hut, spread out in every direction.

Lexa’s gaze flicked from one to the next, as shrewd as if she’d never been sleeping at all. “My claim should be clear,” she said, her confused growl pitched for Clarke’s ears alone.

After the first time they’d knotted, they had stopped worrying about the alphas outside. Knotting
temporarily changed an omega’s scent, and any lingering suitors would have smelled that Clarke’s heat had been claimed and the contest was over. They would have retreated in defeat, even if she remained unmated.

Lexa stepped closer to the window, a warning snarl rising in her throat.

“Wait,” Clarke said suddenly, holding Lexa back with a hand on her bare chest.

As her eyes adjusted to the darkness outside, Clarke realized something about the alphas wasn’t quite right. They were standing several paces away, which was much farther than before, and they didn’t seem to be hassling one another for the right to come closer. Now that she thought about it, none of them were even facing the hut.

Clarke’s eyes grew wide. As Lexa’s heartbeat thudded beneath her hand, the truth hit her like a Grounder club to the head.

“Lexa, these aren’t alphas,” she breathed, moving to stand at Lexa’s side.

She inhaled deeply through her nose and knew it was true. Alpha was the first scent she’d picked up on, probably thanks to her heat, but now she could detect other smells. There were betas and omegas here, too, all mixed together.

“They’re warriors.”

Lexa’s jaw flexed. “Clarke—“

“Lexa, look.”

The men and women outside wore not the stench of competing alphas, but the armor of Trikru warriors and village guards. They held spears and knives and bows, but their weapons were aimed into the darkness, not at each other. They stood not in aggressive attack positions, but in an orderly circle around the hut, tall and unyielding.

They stood as protectors.

They stood with a purpose.

As Lexa studied them, her expression slowly changed from anger to uncertainty. A crease formed between her eyebrows, and Clarke didn’t know if it was because she could not understand—or because she would not.

“Lexa. These people aren’t here for me.”

She dropped her hand to hold Lexa’s balled fist. She squeezed tightly, gazing up into the proud, hesitant face of her alpha.

The Alpha.

“They’re here for you.”
I'd love to hear what you think! Also, come hang out on [Tumblr](http://example.com) ;)

*Niron* - loved one

*Yu gaf in bilai* *k ai na jok yu of?* - You want me to fuck you?

*Ain— ai skai* *faya— ai hodnes— krei os—* - Mine— my star— my love— so good
Three days after Clarke’s heat struck, it ended.

Privately, Lexa was as relieved as she was disappointed. The days in Clarke’s embrace had been some of the most ecstatic of her life, but also some of the most trying.

Despite the overwhelming pleasure they had shared, and how she’d reassured Clarke, Lexa had grown quickly tired during their coupling. Pain had seared through her body more often than not, though she’d refused to let it show. She had determined the pain to originate from her infected lungs, not the wound in her gut, and she had judged it more than a fair price to pay for the gift that was Clarke’s heat.

The gift that was Clarke.

It was Clarke’s health she worried over more than her own. She had grown thin while Lexa was unconscious, and heat was hard on an omega’s body even in the best of times. It should have been preceded by a handful of warning days for Clarke to sleep and prepare. Days for Lexa to fluff the furs beneath her head and serve her plates piled high with the game she’d caught—or days for Clarke to leave for an omega compound, if she so chose. Instead it had blindsided them both.

An unmated omega with her nose pressed for days to the alpha she loves? Pressed to you, goufa? It’s a wonder it didn’t come sooner, Felia had said the first night, stern but affectionate as she stood at the bedroom door to deliver a fresh jug of water while Clarke dozed. The words had made Lexa’s stomach churn with guilt and pride in equal measure.

Felia had brought food and water to the doorjamb each day, along with Lexa’s pink Sky pills, but she had known better than to enter the room itself. Even though Felia posed no threat, and even though the hut was rightfully hers, stepping between an alpha and her omega in heat was a gamble that intelligent people tended to avoid.

Lexa liked to think she was better than that—that she was strong enough to tell real danger from imagined and act accordingly—but all her precise rules and careful barriers seemed to crumble in the presence of Clarke.

She could not have fathomed, for instance, that she would ever lie with an omega in heat without agreeing to terms beforehand. It wasn’t a crime, per se, so long as the omega actively and eagerly consented—and confirmed as much once the heat had passed—but it was certainly nothing to be proud of. She could practically feel Anya’s cool glare on her face, followed by a swift whack to the

Please forgive me for the extreme delay! I really struggled with this chapter, and I’m still not totally happy with it. It’s not as heavily edited as the others, so apologies in advance if you notice mistakes or awkward pacing. I just needed to get it off my screen! On the plus side, it’s also way too long?

Happiest of holidays to you all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
She and Clarke had shared a bed in Polis, but that was hardly the same as sharing a heat. No matter how Clarke’s lustful pheromones had engulfed her here in the hut—or how hard Clarke had begged to be fucked, she remembered with a shudder—Lexa had initially worried that her feelings might change once her cycle ended.

As the days passed, the worst of her fears receded. Heat might have induced the arousal in Clarke’s eyes, but it could not have been responsible for the love she saw in them. For the way Clarke had smiled down at her, radiant and glowing, or the way Clarke had handled her alpha with typical brazen charm even as Lexa ostensibly dominated her.

Still, Lexa would feel more at ease when Clarke returned to her on the narrow mattress. The omega was currently across the room, carefully washing the sweat and slick from her body. Nyko had left a shallow tub and clean furs outside the door once the smell of heat had begun to fade, and Lexa had traded him the soiled linens to stash away until she could clean them. She had bathed first at Clarke’s sleepy insistence, and she’d opened the window to let in a cool breeze on her way back to the bed.

Soon the room would be clear of all but the faintest traces of heat pheromones, and she could be truly sure that Clarke harbored no regrets.

As if she could sense the worries on Lexa’s mind, Clarke turned her dripping head. “Stop thinking so hard.”

Lexa’s cheeks warmed like a pup’s. “I’m not thinking,” she said, as petulant as it was inane.

Clarke grinned, and she stood from the tub. Water droplets ran over her breasts and between her legs, where her flesh was still pink and swollen. The forces that protected her from pain during her heat would soon clear, and she would be left tender and sore.

The sight still sent a tremor to Lexa’s clit, making it pulse with the urge to grow once more. She doubted that was even possible at this point, but she was glad she’d slipped back into a dark shirt and under shorts all the same. She knew they needed to talk, and her cock jutting up between them would hardly facilitate level-headed discussion. It was why they had agreed to bathe separately, despite the fact that Lexa’s fingers itched to take the cloth Clarke was using to dry and run it across her skin herself.

Clarke finished wringing out her hair, then stepped out of the tub. She padded back to the mattress, pulling on a borrowed sleeveless shirt. When she sank down and scooted into Lexa’s side, Lexa cursed herself for ever suggesting they get clean. The scent of Clarke freshly scrubbed, her pure omega sweetness unobscured by dirt or sweat, would normally have dragged Lexa to her knees. Now, though, all she could focus on was that Clarke no longer smelled like hers.

Other Trikru alphas might have been proud that they’d managed to resist staking a permanent claim on a heat-stricken omega, but Lexa could only feel ashamed of how terribly close she’d come. Each time her knot had slipped inside Clarke’s molten center, Lexa’s teeth had burned to sink into her throat. The heat had made Clarke whimper and keen to be mated, and Lexa had nearly broken more than once. Twice she had bitten through her own lip, and three times into her wrist, to keep from sealing the Sky girl’s fate.

Lexa pulled Clarke closer, pressing her nose to her damp, unmarked pulse point. It wasn’t until Clarke laughed that she realized she was rubbing her face against Clarke’s neck, scent-marking her like an animal. She jerked back in embarrassment, but Clarke’s fingers tangled in her hair and held her close.
“You missed a spot,” Clarke said, tilting her head to let Lexa nuzzle the other side of her throat. Lexa dropped her forehead to Clarke’s collarbone, blushing, but the alpha inside her preened.

“Hey,” Clarke said. “Come back here.” She dipped down to catch Lexa’s lips in a kiss.

Lexa tilted her head to drink deeply from the omega—her omega, she thought secretly, in spirit if not by mating. She could still taste Clarke’s heat on the back of her tongue, thick and cloying, and she nearly lost herself all over again.

It was with great effort that she eventually pulled away and cleared her throat. “Regrets, niron?” she asked softly, brushing her thumb over Clarke’s bruised lower lip.

Clarke opened her mouth, but she couldn’t seem to settle on an answer.

Lexa’s heart shot up into her throat. Her arm dropped to her side like a stone.

“No, that’s not what I meant!” Clarke grabbed Lexa’s limp hands. “Lexa, besides finding you alive, I’ve never wanted anything more than I wanted this. You have to know that.”

Deep down, Lexa did know. But hearing Clarke say it allowed her to start breathing again. “But?” she prompted.

“The only thing I regret is the timing, and…” Clarke glanced down at their joined hands. “The location.”

For the umpteenth time, Lexa felt a flash of anger toward the Sky People who had raised Clarke to feel ashamed of her body’s needs instead of proud of its abilities. When she spoke, she made sure her anger was buried too deep for Clarke to hear.

“Heat is a natural part of life, Clarke. Show me a member of the Woods Clan, and I will show you someone who has gone into heat somewhere they did not expect, or helped someone who has.”

Clarke sat up straighter. “Have you helped someone? Before now, I mean.” There was a twinge of jealousy in her voice.

Lexa’s eyes creased in amusement. “I have escorted omega warriors to safety when they required it, yes.”

“Oh.” Clarke deflated. “Okay.”

“Felicia is an omega herself. She understands,” Lexa said. “Nyko is a healer. He has seen much worse than this, I assure you.”

Clarke nodded, but she didn’t seem convinced. She curled her arms around her middle and looked out across the room. “It’s not just them,” she admitted.

Lexa’s stomach clenched. She knew who Clarke was worried about, but she didn’t know how to explain that her first love was no longer here in the walls of this hut. She lived on in Lexa’s heart, always, but her spirit had risen up to the stars long ago.

“Costia would have been glad you did not suffer,” she finally said, and knew it was true.

Clarke nodded again, clearly trying to hide her small exhale of relief. It was difficult to tell if she believed Lexa’s reassurances, but she seemed grateful for them all the same.
As they sat together, Lexa unwound Clarke’s arms. She rubbed slow circles over her palms, across her wrists, and up her forearms. It was a different sort of physical comfort than what they’d become accustomed to over the last days, but Clarke soon began to soften under her touch. Eventually she sank back against the wall at Lexa’s side, her eyes fluttering shut.

“Never stop doing that,” she mumbled.

Lexa didn’t plan to… until her thumb brushed over a scar on Clarke’s arm. A recent scar—and one that was shaped like teeth.

She had noticed it days ago, but she’d avoided asking about it while Clarke was in heat for fear the answer might send her into a violent, irrational rage. She knew the scar was not a mating mark, thanks to its location and Clarke’s obviously unmated scent, but there was a chance it had been an attempt at one. A forced attempt.

“Who did this?” Lexa asked, her voice low and tight. Despite how she tried to control herself, Clarke’s nose wrinkled at her volatile scent.

“It’s nothing,” Clarke said. “It was an accident.”

Lexa raised an eyebrow.

“Okay, not an accident, but Raven was being controlled by A.L.I.E., and—“

“Raven?” Lexa growled. In truth, Clarke could have given any name, and Lexa would have snarled just the same. The fact that Reivon kom Skaikru was a beta, though, made her challenging pheromones recede. And remembering that she had already had the girl tied to a tree and sliced open—albeit unjustly—eased her fury just a fraction.

“Oh, stop,” Clarke said, shooting her a look. “It wasn’t her fault. You’re going to see Raven again one day, probably soon, and you’re going to be nice. Got it?”

Lexa made a noncommittal sound through her teeth. If she couldn’t maim Clarke’s friends, then she would find and punish every one of the other people responsible for the many new wounds she had discovered on Clarke’s body.

“What about these?” she said, turning over one of Clarke’s hands. She touched her thumb to the center of her palm, where a ring of tiny half-healed gouges had been carved out.

Clarke tugged her hand back, twisting it into the clean sheets they’d tucked around the mattress. “Lexa, it’s—” She looked away, blushing. “You’re the one who’s injured, okay? That’s what we need to focus on.”

Lexa frowned. She hadn’t expected such a minor injury to spark a negative reaction, and it only made her more concerned. “Clarke, you can tell me. Who hurt you?”

“No one,” Clarke said, exasperated.

“Clarke.”

“Okay!” She sighed. “Okay, fine.”

She leaned across Lexa’s lap to reach for her pile of folded clothing beside the bed. She dragged a black leather jacket back with her, then fished in one of its pockets. A moment later, she held up a small metal object between her thumb and forefinger.
Lexa’s eyes widened in recognition. It was the brass Wheel of the Clans, which Gustus had had made for her on the day she inducted Azgeda into the Coalition. Its circular shape stood for progress and forward motion. Its material, permanency and endurance.

“I found it in your bed,” Clarke said. Her blush deepened. “So it’s my fault. Seriously, Lexa, my hand is fine.”

Lexa didn’t understand the connection between the Wheel and Clarke’s hand until she let it tumble into her palm. For each of the twelve spokes—each of the twelve clans—there was a small pink divot in Clarke’s skin.

Clarke held the Wheel out to her. “Here.”

Lexa took Clarke’s fingers instead. She curled them closed around the circle of metal and pressed trembling lips to her knuckles.

“I’m sorry,” Lexa whispered, her voice sticking in her throat.

She had never wanted this for Clarke. She had tried so hard to teach her that hodnes laik kwelnes, to protect her from this sort of hollow loss. It was obvious now that she had failed—and she had failed to learn it for herself, too.

If she were really the wise and hardened commander she pretended to be, she would let Clarke go. She would recognize that she was going to die again one day—as was Clarke—and she would protect both their hearts from the misery that awaited.

“Don’t do that,” Clarke said crossly, pulling her hand from Lexa’s grip. “Don’t give me that look. It’s way too late for that look, Lexa. You can make some passionate speech about weakness every day for the rest of my life if you feel like it, I don’t care, but I’m going to love you either way. Okay?”

In spite of herself, a faint smile crossed Lexa’s lips. For better or worse, she suspected the indignant Sky girl beside her was right. If there had ever been a time to fortify her heart against Clarke Griffin, it was long passed. The omega had managed to fight and sneak her way into that stronghold, despite the fact that it had burned down years ago. Somehow it had been rebuilt, beam by beam and stone by stone, with Clarke as its living, breathing center. It seemed all Lexa could do now was move forward and hope the shoring held.

Besides, she wasn’t the commander, hardened or otherwise. Not anymore.

She tugged Clarke in to her side, her lips pressed to wet blonde hair. It was the one place on the omega’s fresh-scrubbed body where she still smelled irreversibly of Clarke.

“Sha,” Lexa said. “Okay.”

“Oh, then.” Clarke huffed, but she seemed unable to resist the draw of Lexa’s skin. She curled in against her body, inhaling deeply at the crook of Lexa’s neck.

Just then, there was an intentional rustle at the reed doorway. Lexa recognized it as the Burou version of a knock.

“Heya,” said Felia from beyond the reeds. “Taking visitors yet?”

Lexa sat back far enough to look at Clarke, a question in her eyes.
Clarke averted her gaze. She seemed to brace herself. She tugged one of the clean furs tight over her bare lower half, then squared her shoulders. “Of course,” she called. “Come in.”

Felial ducked in through the reeds, a steaming ceramic pot in one hand. “Well, well,” she said, smiling. “Back to normal, I see.”

Clarke’s cheeks blazed, and she looked anywhere but at Felia. Lexa felt helpless to reassure her. She knew instinctively that trying to comfort Clarke in front of Felia would only embarrass her more.

“Felia, I’m so sorry,” Clarke said haltingly. “I didn’t mean to— for us to— or to put you in danger when—“

Felia waved her hand. “Oh, strikon. A heat does not mean to. A heat just does.”

“But—“

“Do you know where I went into my first heat?” Felia leaned against the door frame, pausing for effect. “In a tree.”

Clarke’s gaze crept up from the floor. She looked skeptical.

“Mm-hmm,” Felia confirmed. “It took me half a day to figure out how to climb back down, and I still landed on my bakon. The second time was in a chicken coop.”

A hesitant, lopsided smile crossed Clarke’s face. “You’re making that up.”

Felia grinned back. “It belonged to an alpha boy in my village. I liked his face and his smell, so I told him I would watch his chickens while he went to battle as his sire’s seken. I must have been close to my heat and didn’t know it, because the minute I crawled into that coop and caught this boy’s scent lingering there…” She whistled, low and long. “His nomon found me inside the next morning, whimpering his name and covered in feathers.”

A laugh was startled out of Clarke. Even Lexa’s lips twitched up, though she knew this story was not meant for her alpha ears.

“No way,” Clarke said.

“Sha way,” said Felia, butchering the Gonalslang slang. “So you see I have much more reason to turn red than you, goufa. And remember what I told you.” She looked pointedly at Clarke, but she tilted her head in Lexa’s direction.

Clarke turned amused eyes on Lexa. “It’s always the alpha’s fault.”

“And don’t forget it.”

The last time Lexa had been teased like she wasn’t in the room, she’d been a lanky adolescent pup trailing at Anya’s heels. It took all her remaining dignity to keep from rolling her eyes, which surely would only have made the omegas’ mirth more insufferable.

“Truly, I am glad you are both well.” Felia said, growing more serious. Her grip tightened on the pot she held. “Many know of the feats an omega’s body can perform in heat, but it is also true that an alpha’s body will rally to answer the call. It will press down pain and injury to meet the omega’s needs. But Nyko says there is only one way for a body to mend.”

“With a healer,” Clarke guessed, solemn.
“Slowly,” Felia corrected. She looked at Lexa. “The way you feel now will not last, Heda. You must be careful. You must be slow. Nyko would like to examine you later.”

“Of course,” Clarke said quickly.

Lexa’s jaw flexed at the use of her old title, and then at being answered for. Most of all, she resented the implication that her recovery would regress. She did not feel like a patient anymore. These three days with Clarke had made the last dormant parts of her blink back to life. Feeling Clarke writhe beneath her and cry out her name had awoken not only her body, as Felia claimed, but the woman and the alpha inside it. She would not be treated like an invalid any longer, no matter how her stomach still smarted or her lungs still burned.

“The warriors outside,” she said, suppressing a cough as she changed the subject.

She nodded to the small open window, through which she could see the backs of the villagers who had come to surround the hut during Clarke’s heat. They still stood sentry, compelled by some mysterious force to protect a commander who was no more.

Lexa suspected she knew exactly what that force was, and she gazed shrewdly at Felia. “That was you, wasn’t it?”

Felia pursed her lips. “It was me who reminded them they saw no ghost, but the woman who sacrificed herself to protect them all these years. The rest they did on their own.”

“You mean the woman they believe is still Heda,” Lexa argued. “I will not mislead my people to serve my own—”

“That,” Felia said, “is exactly why they don’t give a jok which spirit you have. They know you no longer hold the throne, and still they are here. It’s a good thing, too. Word has started to spread of you. Already travelers from neighboring villages come to see if it is true. If Leksa kom Trikru lives. Would you prefer they had come inside to check for themselves?”

Lexa ground her teeth. She was unused to being argued with, let alone interrupted. If she did still have the Spirit, she could not have allowed such impertinence to stand—not even from the woman who was the closest thing she’d had to a mother since before she could remember.

But Lexa did not have the Spirit. And despite what she was accustomed to, there was a certain relief in not having to respond to dissent with ire. She was left feeling unsteady and adrift, and unsure who she was most frustrated with.

Under the furs, Clarke reached over and squeezed her thigh. She let out a wisp of calming omega pheromones, which still smelled sleepy and satisfied from her heat. No matter how she tried to stay annoyed, Lexa found herself relaxing back against the wall.

“I will leave you two to rest,” Felia said, apparently satisfied she’d made her point.

Before she left, she squatted down to pick up one of their tin water mugs from the floor. She tilted it to see if it was empty, then poured a dark liquid into it from the pot she’d brought in.

A powerful scent filled Lexa’s nostrils, simultaneously bitter and minty, and she knew immediately what the pot contained.

“Three cups spaced across the day, goufa, if you want it,” Felia told Clarke, handing her the mug. “I can reheat it if it gets cold, but it should come from this pot. It becomes stronger as time passes. I will
“Leave it here for you.” She set the pot on the stool under the windowsill.

“Um, thanks?” Clarke said, clearly trying not to crumple her nose.

When Felia had slipped out through the reeds, Clarke looked questioningly at Lexa.

Lexa kept her face neutral, though the sight of the steaming drink in Clarke’s hands made the alpha inside her stamp and roar.

“It’s the tea I told you about.” She hesitated, then licked her lips. “It will stop my seed from taking hold.”

Clarke frowned down into the mug. “Oh.”

They had discussed the tea after the first time they’d knotted, when Lexa had hastened to assure Clarke that there were measures they could take to prevent a pregnancy besides relying on the fading Ark tek embedded in her arm. Clarke had let out a miserable whine, thanks to her heat, and Lexa had silently agreed with the sentiment. In the fever of the moment, the thought of Clarke’s belly swollen with her pups had made her throb. She had decided to broach the subject again once the haze had cleared, but it seemed Nyko and his vials of herbs had beaten her to it.

“Isn’t it too late?” Clarke asked, staring into the green-flecked mixture. “I mean, if my implant failed, won’t I have already conceived?”

The thought made Lexa’s heart beat fast, but she held the feeling down. “I don’t know,” she said honestly. Her knowledge of healing was mainly theoretical, and her understanding of heats even more so. “It is always administered after a heat, not during.”

“So it doesn’t prevent pregnancy,” Clarke concluded. “It stops it.”

Lexa didn’t fully grasp the distinction, but it seemed to weigh heavily on the omega at her side. “The reactions are minor for most,” she said, hoping to hit on something that would soothe her. “Discomfort and dizziness. Perhaps some nausea.”

The corners of Clarke’s lips quirked up, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Grounder Plan B.”

“I’m sorry, Clarke. In the future, there is a different mixture I can drink instead. It must be taken each day to be effective. I didn’t realize I would need it, or—“

“No, no, it’s not that. It’s just…” For a long while, Clarke stared into the steam that curled up from the mug. “Have you ever wondered what it would be like?”

“Yes.”

Clarke gave her a rueful smile—a real one, this time. “Me too,” she admitted.

For a fleeting instant, Lexa allowed herself to imagine that this was the *maybe someday* Clarke had once described. She pictured herself easing the mug from Clarke’s hands, and whispering tender words into her ear, and letting the spirits decide their fate.

But as quickly as the fantasy had spun to life, Lexa unraveled it. Even if her chance at liberty had finally come, Clarke’s had not. It was obvious from the constant hunch of her shoulders that her burdens as a leader had not been lifted. If anything, they’d been piled higher. Who was Lexa to demand even more of her? Who was she to suggest they bring children into such an uncertain world? A world without a leader? Without peace?
She hadn’t seen her beloved Polis yet, but she could tell from Clarke’s reticence on the subject that Ontari’s legacy of violence would be even worse than she feared. There was a large part of Lexa that ached to get back the capital and start setting things right. How could she be of any use with babies in her arms?

“I know it’s too soon,” Clarke said, “and we’re too young, and there’s the—” She cut herself off, looking guilty for whatever she could not say. “There are lots of reasons. I know it would be stupid.”

Lexa nodded, not trusting her voice. They were not too young by Trikru standards, but she didn’t say so. This was Clarke’s decision, whatever it would be.

Clarke studied the tea, conflicted emotions playing across her face. After many silent minutes, she took an experimental sip. Lexa could tell from her expression that it was pungent, but she hardened her features, sat up straight, and drained the rest.

When the mug was empty and the deed was done, she looked as relieved as she did mournful.

Lexa knew the feeling.

With a sharp inhale, Clarke stood. She held herself with the rush of renewed vigor that came from finalizing a decision, and she crossed the room to look out the window. Despite her newfound energy, her bare legs were shaky and her gait was stiff.

Lexa suspected she was beginning to feel the effects of the last three days, and she was out of bed and at Clarke’s back in an instant, just in time to steady her as she wobbled before the window. She tried to tell herself it was the residual impact of heat pheromones that made her react to Clarke’s needs with such instinctive speed, but she knew better. The omega had been under her skin for long before they’d succumbed to her mating cycle.

Clarke leaned back into her chest, wet hair cool against Lexa’s cheek. “This is a good sign,” she said, peering out the window.

Lexa followed her gaze to the backs of the warriors stationed outside. “A sign of what?”

Clarke turned around to face Lexa. She seemed to have regained her balance, and with it, the bearing and acuity of a leader. “A sign of you,” she said, as if Lexa were acting particularly dense. “You heard Felia. These people are here because they still believe in you, Flame or no Flame.”

Lexa tensed. “Clarke—”

“When you threw open that door to save me, I thought it was all over. I thought the world finding out you were alive would be the worst possible thing. But look.” She gestured at the window with a small, disbelieving laugh. “I told you your people would want you back, didn’t I?”

The back of Lexa’s neck pulsed. She had never associated that spot with the Spirit during her reign, but ever since Clarke had told her the truth about how she’d ascended, her spine seemed to tingle each time she pondered her unknown future.

She felt bereft without the past commanders whispering in her mind, and aimless without the unyielding responsibility to her people that had once directed her every conscious thought. And yet the idea of that tek crawling back under her skin—of collaring herself once more to that particular chair in Polis—made Lexa’s insides clench. With excitement? With dread? She didn’t know.

The silence in her mind felt like a void, but it felt like peace, too.
She stepped away from the window, itching for a war table to lord over or a knife to turn in her hands. But the old trappings of her authority were gone. There was only her now.

"Burou is a loyalist village, Clarke," Lexa said, linking her hands behind her back. "It receives good trade year round thanks to its proximity to Polis, and many of its warriors hold high rank in the Coalition army."

Clarke didn’t look convinced. "If it were only about that, they’d be loyal to the alliance itself, not to you personally."

"As you have probably gathered, I favored Burou even above my predecessors. The villagers here have made a calculated decision to support a known entity in hopes of retaining their privilege. Not many of our people will share their outlook, especially outside of Trikru territory."

"But—"

Lexa looked out the window. "If Polis is as you say, those who hunger for power are already vying for the throne. They will not take kindly to learning there is a Trikru village that supports my claim, and they will have many more weapons at their disposal than Felia’s neighbors."

It was obvious Clarke didn’t agree with Lexa’s expectations of their people, but she folded her arms and bit her lip as she thought. "Then we leave."

Lexa couldn’t help but glance down at Clarke’s naked bottom half—at the tender flesh between her legs and the overused muscles trembling in her thighs. "No. You shouldn’t travel so soon after heat."

Clarke eyed her, her hands on her hips. "You shouldn’t travel so soon after being shot."

And yet, the longer Lexa considered it, the more certain she felt that leaving was the right thing to do. If not for herself or the Coalition, then at least for Felia. She had brought enough danger to the woman’s doorstep already; she would not risk drawing political turmoil here, too.

"I will go alone," Lexa said, ignoring Clarke’s concern. She tried to make her voice firm, but the thought of separating made her stomach roll. "You will stay here and rest until you are well."

Clarke raised a displeased eyebrow. "I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that. If you’re going, I’m going. We’re safer together, Lexa."

Lexa swallowed. Years ago, she had spoken similar words. She had told Anya and Titus that Costia was safest at her side, and she had convinced herself it was true. In reality, she’d just been too weak to see her go. Costia had laughed off each of the advisers’ dire warnings, and Lexa had let her, and now all that was left of her was a crumbling sketch on Felia’s mantle.

But as Clarke peered at her—into her, it seemed—Lexa was reminded that the two women she loved were not the same. Costia had been brilliant and imaginative, with a mischievous mind and a poet’s heart. She sang songs to rouse warriors and told stories in peacetime, and she’d never met a child who hadn’t adored her. She didn’t see the darkness in the world, people used to say, because her own light burned too bright. She had brought color and depth to Lexa’s austere existence, and in return Lexa had tried to hold her fragile life in her hands.

Clarke’s light was a different sort. It illuminated everyone that surrounded her, and she only saw the world more clearly for it. Her domain, like Lexa’s, was the here and now. She was a formidable leader in her own right, and she understood Lexa in ways no other person had since her conclave. She wasn’t Lexa’s subject, or Lexa’s responsibility, or Lexa’s duty. She was just Lexa’s… and then, she wasn’t even really that. Though Lexa longed to see her mating bite mark Clarke’s neck, she
knew the omega would never truly belong to anyone but herself—and she loved her ferociously for it.

If Lexa agreed they should leave Burou together, she wouldn’t be letting Clarke stay by her side. Try as she might, she never seemed to let Clarke do anything.

After many silent moments, Lexa nodded.

“Good,” Clarke said, as if it were settled. Lexa supposed it was. Clarke had already returned to the mattress to tug on her underwear and jeans, and she knelt down to sort her handful of other belongings. As she packed, she glanced up at Lexa. “Then we head for Arkadia?”

Lexa leaned against the wall beside the window. After the last three days, her legs and lungs felt as if she’d already sprinted to Arkadia and back. “You tell me.”

Clarke frowned. “You’re not going to try and insist on going to Polis?”

Lexa did want to go to Polis—desperately. She also feared what she would encounter there, both inside the city and inside herself. “Whatever the villagers outside believe, I am not Heda yet. You are the leader between us, Clarke, and you know the state of the world better than I do. I trust your judgment.”

Clarke stared back at her with poorly veiled surprise, her heart laid bare in her shimmering eyes. For all her considerable skills, for all her confidence and determination, it seemed there was still a part of her that expected to be rebuffed by alphas at every turn.

Lexa had long been sensitive to prejudice based on gender, but it wasn’t until she’d met Clarke that her abstract awareness of injustice had taken a painfully definitive shape. It made Lexa sick to think of the gifts that had been squandered for so many years on the Ark, and to wonder what facets of Clarke’s personality had been permanently worn away before she’d ever gotten the chance to know them.

At last Clarke cleared her throat. “Polis is too dangerous,” she said. “There’s a chance you’d have to fight, and you’re not ready for that. I won’t risk it. In Arkadia we have IVs and ultrasounds and protein packs, and you’ll be able to get stronger faster.”

Lexa looked away, burying the displeasure she felt at being thought incapable. Clarke wasn’t wrong, and she would not bear the brunt of Lexa’s frustrations with her injuries. “You also have plenty of your own who would like to see me dead.”

Clarke sighed. “Not as many as before, at least.”

When Lexa looked back, Clarke watched her with a wistful smile.


“You said yet. You’re not the commander yet. It’s the first time you’ve talked about it like it’s a real possibility.”

Clarke glanced down at the belongings she’d stacked into a pile, and at the rolled piece of leather on top. Lexa recognized it as the drawing she’d worked on each day before her heat but had refused to let Lexa see. As she ran her fingers over the twine that held it closed, her smile faltered.

“I thought I would be happy,” Clarke said. “I am happy, I just—“ Her throat bobbed. “I wish I didn’t have to ask this of you.”
Omega distress singed Lexa’s nostrils like the Maunon’s acid fog. She crossed the room and crouched down beside the mattress, ready to promise anything she was asked if only it would clear the sour scent of Clarke’s sorrow from the air.

Before she could lay down her soul or her sword or anything else that Clarke wanted, she caught an odd tinge of copper and brass alongside the anguish. Her nose told her Clarke’s clenched hand was the source, and she eased it away from the rolled-up drawing.

In the center of Clarke’s palm was the Wheel of the Clans, still, after all this time. Two of the gouges in her skin had been reopened, and the spokes were beaded with a thin, orange-red mixture of blood and sweat.

Lexa took the bit of brass, wiping its face clean with her thumb. She pressed a kiss to Clarke’s fingers. “This doesn’t have to be your burden, Clarke.”

Clarke smiled sadly. “Actually, it does. I’m the Flamekeeper now, remember?”

“Then let the Flame guide you.” As she spoke, Lexa pretended the words were for Clarke’s benefit alone. “The Spirit will choose well, as it always does. What comes will come.”

Deep down, Lexa knew Clarke was much too stubborn to ever sit back and hand her responsibilities over to the fates. Still, the alpha in her demanded that she find some way to ease the strain that drew her omega’s eyebrows together, even if only for a moment. She let out a wave of the heavy, protective alpha scent that was inspired by Clarke alone. And when Clarke suddenly leaned in to kiss her, she welcomed the gentle assault.

It wasn’t until she lost her balance that she realized Clarke had closed the space between them, and was edging nearer still. She caught herself on her wrists, landing on the mattress with a quiet mmph.

Unfazed, Clarke followed her down. She feathered kisses from Lexa’s temple to her chin, then down into the valley between her breasts. Moments later, the clothing they had so deliberately donned was being slowly peeled away.

Lexa leaned up, concerned. “Clarke—”

“Shh,” Clarke hushed.

Her pale thigh found the space between Lexa’s legs and pressed in close, and Lexa’s uncertainty died on her lips.

“The Flame did guide me,” Clarke murmured. “It led me here to you.”

Lexa leaned up again, but this time it was to catch Clarke’s lips. She tasted like sunshine, though she hadn’t been outside in days, and like the honeyed aromas of the cook fire that Lexa barely remembered from her childhood home.

There was a time not so long ago—a handful of days, to Lexa’s perception—that she had doubted whether she would ever kiss Clarke again. Whether she would ever see Clarke again, once she disappeared behind the blockade around Arkadia. Now Clarke was here with her—against her, on top of her—with no imminent goodbye and no pheromones to blame. It blew her away all over again.

Lexa didn’t know if it was the Flame that had led Clarke to her. The consciousness of each dead commander had been present in Clarke’s mind for the brief time she was Heda, and that included Lexa’s own. Was it possible her spirit was the one who had seeded Felia and Burou in Clarke’s
thoughts? If it had, was that the Spirit? Was there any difference? Did it even matter?

As Clarke dragged her hand down the side of Lexa’s breast, she lost track of her questions. Clarke’s fingertips were warm on her goose-pimpled skin, and the trail they blazed was even hotter.

Lexa let her own hand mirror Clarke’s. She wandered over the soft skin of her cheek, along her side, and down around the curve of her hip. When her fingers dipped into silky dark-blonde curls, Clarke’s breath caught.

Lexa pulled back, fearing she’d misunderstood and that Clarke was too tender to be touched.

Clarke grabbed her wrist. “No, don’t stop. Just go slow.”

After three days of frenzy, Lexa was ready for slow. She trailed feather-light touches over Clarke’s clit, which was still pebbled from overuse, and down between her quaking thighs. Clarke’s inner lips were still as swollen as if they’d lain together moments ago, and she twitched and sighed at each brush of Lexa’s fingers.

Nothing about Clarke’s breathy moans suggested she was in pain, but Lexa kept her attentions faint until Clarke gripped her hand and ground it against her flesh. She moved faster then, circling Clarke’s clit and dipping ever so slightly into the dewy wetness at her entrance.

“Lexa,” Clarke sighed.

Lexa discovered she had been wrong before. It was most certainly possible for her clit to grow again, and it pulsed and lengthened as she slid a finger into Clarke’s opening. By the time Clarke’s hips rocked up to meet her slow thrusts, her cock was heavy and throbbing between her legs.

Clarke noticed. “Come here,” she said, reaching for Lexa’s shaft.

Lexa hovered just out of reach. “You’re too sore,” she murmured, kissing Clarke’s throat. “Let me take care of you.”

“That’s what you’ve been doing for the last three days. I’m fine, and I want—”

Lexa gently curled her finger and delighted in Clarke’s gasp. It worked to stem her determination—but only for a moment.


Lexa let her eyebrows furrow in confusion. “I am inside you, Clarke.”

An almost-growl rumbled in Clarke’s chest. “Lexa.”

Lexa couldn’t help but grin through the next many kisses. It had been nearly impossible to tease Clarke during her heat—partly because prolonging an omega’s suffering was cruel, and partly because the heat pheromones had made her almost as crazed as Clarke. Now, she basked in each frustrated huff and every wriggle of her hips.

In truth, though, they both knew there was little Lexa could deny the omega who’d invaded her heart. Before Clarke could flip them over and take matters into her own hands, Lexa surrendered. She withdrew her finger, then stroked Clarke’s generous wetness over her shaft.

As she poised at Clarke’s entrance, she hid any remaining hesitation in deep, dominant tones. “You will tell me to stop if it becomes too much.”
Now that Clarke’s mind was clear, she didn’t bow under Lexa’s commands. She rolled her eyes, cracking a bemused smirk. “We’ve done stuff together that I didn’t even know was possible, and you’re worried now?”

The gibe made Lexa’s cheeks flush, and so did the memories of the stuff Clarke referred to. She had a point.

Clarke’s smile softened. “Just kiss me.”

Lexa did. And as their mouths moved together, she reached between them to guide the wide head of her cock into Clarke’s tight opening.

Clarke’s breath hitched at the first stretch, and Lexa waited for her to adjust. With no heat hormones to ease the process, it would be up to Clarke’s mind to relax her muscles enough to accommodate her. Lexa ghosted kisses along her jaw and murmured lowly in her ear, and soon she was able to sink in another inch, and then another.

When she was fully seated, it was Lexa’s own breath that snagged. It seemed Clarke wasn’t the only one who was tender and hypersensitive from days spent tangled in the furs. The grip around her shaft made Lexa shudder with a sharp blend of pleasure and pain, and she struggled not to cry out.

Soon, Clarke’s slick warmth proved too tempting to resist. Lexa pulled back slightly, despite the initial discomfort, then eased back in. With every slow stroke, it vanished further into bliss.

“God, Lexa,” Clarke breathed, her back arching. She twined her hands in the messy hair at the nape of Lexa’s neck. “You’d think I would have gotten enough by now, but nope.”

Lexa was glad for the quip, for it let her hide a gasp in a huff of laughter. She meant to respond in kind, but the words that escaped were quiet and earnest. “I could never have enough of you.”

The smile Clarke flashed in return seemed to brighten the very cores of her bones.

They moved languidly together, rocking against the fresh furs. Clarke took her in deeper with every roll of their hips, though Lexa was careful not to succumb to the urge to grind her pubic bone into Clarke’s sensitive skin. Instead she reached down between their bodies, rolling her thumb over Clarke’s clit each time she slid home.

In another dozen strokes, Clarke’s moans became stilted and breathless. When she clenched down suddenly around Lexa’s cock, it was all Lexa could do to keep moving. An abrupt climax threatened to overtake her, but she managed to hold on long enough to feel Clarke jerk and whimper beneath her.

“Jok,” Lexa muttered, gritting her teeth.

Clarke’s muscles rippled from the base of her shaft up to the swollen red tip, and there was no more holding back. Lexa hurtled toward her own peak.

She considered briefly if she should pull out, now that her seed was no longer required to satisfy Clarke’s cravings. But as she cast a hooded look to Clarke’s still-hungry eyes, she wasn’t entirely sure that was true. Besides, an omega was unlikely to fall pregnant outside of a mating cycle, wasn’t she? And they still had the tea.

Clarke’s thighs came up to wrap around Lexa’s hips, and she raised off the mattress to urge her in farther. “Lexa. Let go.”
It was Clarke’s hushed voice that drove her over the edge. With a groan, she thrust forward once more. With another, she spilled deep inside of Clarke.

“God,” Clarke said. She twined her arms around Lexa’s shoulders. “I don’t know how you feel so good.”

Lexa blinked, only half aware of exactly who and where she was. As her wits returned, she realized she had collapsed on top of Clarke during her climax. She made to pull away, but Clarke’s fingers dug into her biceps. It seemed Clarke had gotten used to having her close—and buried deep inside her—after they came. The thought made a throb of pleasure run the length of Lexa’s softening shaft.

But they weren’t tied like they had been before, and her weight was more than Clarke should bear. As a compromise, Lexa rolled them over. She drew Clarke to her chest instead, though she too mourned the moment when her cock slipped free from the omega’s warmth.

Clarke sighed, nuzzling in close. Her pout was practically audible, but she stroked lazy fingers along Lexa’s collarbone and over her breasts. When she reached the scar tissue on Lexa’s abdomen, she stopped short.

Despite her lingering daze, Lexa sensed a shift in the air. Clarke’s scent was changing from sated to distressed, and her fingers tensed on Lexa’s skin.

“Lexa,” Clarke said meaningfully.

Lexa braced herself for whatever would come next.

“The Spirit doesn’t choose the commander. Not really. The conclave does.” Clarke chewed on her bottom lip, her gaze trained on Lexa’s stomach. “And it can’t happen that way this time.”

She caught Clarke’s hand and squeezed. “Then maybe it is time for someone else to accept the Flame.”

“Who?” Clarke challenged, raising up on one elbow.

She wasn’t being combative, Lexa knew. She really needed to know. 

Who?

“A Nightblood baby? Who else, Lexa?”

“Blood is not the only way to choose a leader.”

Weeks ago, Lexa would have scoffed at the suggestion that her people would accept a commander chosen by any other means. But dying and returning to life had significantly altered her perception of what was possible.

“Lexa,” Clarke said. “There’s something I haven’t told you.”

Lexa stiffened. Here it was, finally—the dark and looming something that Clarke had omitted from her accounts of the prior weeks, but which had shadowed her face in every waking moment.

“It’s not just a civil war we have to worry about,” Clarke said. “We don’t have time to let the clan leaders work out some other way of choosing a commander, never mind wait for a new Nightblood to grow up.”

Wary, Lexa shifted up onto her side. “What else is coming, Clarke? What could be more pressing
than our people exterminating one another?”

“All of us exterminated. Everybody. The whole world. Lexa, that’s what’s happening. Another nuclear holocaust.”

Lexa’s forehead creased. “The bombs were destroyed in *Praimfaya*.”

“The bombs, but not the power plants. There are at least a dozen left, and they’re starting to melt down.”

She had learned years ago that *melt down* was a Gonasleng idiom for destruction, but the words still made her imagine a candle the size of a volcano in some far-flung corner of the Coalition, wax dripping over its sides like lava. That was better than seeing the faces of her people that hovered at the edges of her vision, blistering and burning. It was easier than hearing their screams of agony as their skin wilted away.

“How do you know this?” she asked, more harshly than she intended. She prayed for Clarke to be wrong, but the de facto leader of the Sky almost never was.

“A.L.I.E. told me.” Clarke’s tone was sympathetic and understanding. “That’s the reason she was trying to lure everyone into the City of Light. She thought she was saving us.”

“You’re sure, Clarke.”

Clarke nodded. “That’s the biggest reason we have to go to Arkadia. My mom is in Polis researching where the surviving plants are located in your library, but we need more than that. The planet’s going to be uninhabitable if we don’t find a way to stop this, and we’re never going to find a way to stop it if we don’t have peace. And we won’t have peace if we don’t have—”

“Me,” Lexa finished faintly.

Clarke didn’t need to confirm it. The distress on her face told Lexa everything she needed to know.

She let the new information wash over her in silence. She didn’t bother with the *impossibles* or the *can’t bes* that struggled for air in the ocean of her dread, and soon they were drowned and gone.

She had denied the threat from Azgeda, and Costia had perished. She had denied the threat from Skaikru, and hundreds of her warriors had fallen. She would not deny a threat from the very earth she walked upon, too.

“Lexa?” Clarke touched her shoulder. “I know this a lot to—”

“How long?” she asked hoarsely.

Clarke swallowed. “A season and a half. Maybe less.”

Lexa’s chin dipped toward the mattress. As she studied the coarse weave of the linen sheets, the new life she had begun to imagine—the someday that flickered shapeless and evanescent in her mind—blew away like so many ashes.

In some ways, it was a relief. For as long as she could remember, her very reason for being had revolved around achieving one goal after another. Win the conclave. Unite the clans. Defeat the enemy. Keep the peace. Secure the future.

And now, retake the throne.
Convincing her people to take her back was just another target for Lexa to set her sights on. Helping Clarke save the world was just another war to win.

“So you’ll do it?” Clarke asked, relief and apprehension warring on her face. “You’ll be the commander again?”

Lexa’s life had never been her own, and if necessary, she thought little of surrendering it once more to the will of the Spirit and the good of her people. But as she peered into hopeful blue eyes, she knew she could not allow Clarke to do the same.

If she became Heda, her people would have to come first. Clarke’s safety would come second, and Lexa had learned well that there was no safety for the consort of a commander.

She had given herself over to loving Clarke, and she knew she would endure in that agony until her final breath. No title could change that.

But if she did ascend again, Clarke could never be hers in return. They would not mate. They would not start a family. They would be unlikely to share a heat again, and they would pretend the one Burou had witnessed had been nothing but a hormonal romp.

If Clarke was to have a future, it would not be with her.

The alpha in Lexa howled. And the woman—the woman who had never been Heda, who had always been just Lexa, just a girl—crumbled and wailed. She opened her mouth and almost said that she wouldn’t do it, that she wasn’t strong enough, that her people wouldn’t accept her anyway, that she couldn’t.

Then, one by one, the burning faces in her mind changed. They were no longer anonymous citizens of the Coalition—they were Clarke. They were all Clarke. Their bubbling skin was Clarke’s skin. Their blood was Clarke’s blood. And their screams were Clarke’s screams.

Lexa’s spine straightened. When she finally found her voice, she gave the only answer there was.

One last time, Clarke would come first.

“I will.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m sorry I couldn’t leave you with something more cheerful for the holidays. Just remember these are only Lexa’s private thoughts at a particularly daunting moment, and Clarke would probably have a few choice words for her if she could hear them!
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

I know it’s been an age and I’m sorry! I have no excuse other than typical life obstacles, but I hope you’ll forgive me and enjoy this new chapter. If you didn’t see it yet, I also posted a new one-shot set in this verse a few weeks back.

Many thanks to findyourstars for answering all my horse questions and to anddante for humoring all my ramblings way back when I first started working on this chapter. And a very happy belated birthday to Melicious! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

While they waited for night to fall, Clarke sat on the stool below her bedroom window and put the finishing touches on her drawing. She had started it the day before Lexa woke, and she’d spent every spare moment since perfecting it. Only Nyko had seen it, but he assured her she’d captured her subject with skill and fidelity, from her smiling lips to her bottomless eyes.

As she made her last pen stroke, Lexa parted the reeds to enter the room. There was a candle in her hand and a question on her face.

Clarke acknowledged her with a crooked smile, then chewed her lip as she took a final look at her makeshift leather canvas. When Lexa stepped inside, she hopped to her feet and rolled up the picture before Lexa could catch a glimpse of it.

“Ready,” she said, tucking the drawing under her arm and extinguishing her own candle.

Lexa nodded once, then glanced around the dim bedroom. Her nostrils flared.

While Lexa had been in the fire room speaking with the warriors Indra had sent to guard Felia’s hut, Clarke had changed the linens again and used a cloth and a jug of soapy water to scrub away any lingering traces of her heat. Felia might have moved from this room into Costia’s old bedroom years ago, but that didn’t mean this one was going to sit empty. Octavia would use it next—if Clarke somehow managed to convince her to stay in Burou and get well while she and Lexa left for Arkadia.

Lexa held the reeds open to let Clarke slip out, but she hesitated before following.

Clarke paused outside the doorway, watching Lexa as she studied the straw mattress where she’d defeated death, and where she had finally returned to the world of the living.

“Hey,” Clarke said softly, touching her arm. “You’re okay now.”

Lexa’s intense gaze didn’t waver from the bed. “That is not what I’m remembering.”

Clarke swallowed, her cheeks flushing with warmth. In addition to being Lexa’s sickbed, this was also the bed where they’d shared their first mutual confessions of love, not to mention the unexpected heat that had ended only a few hours ago. They had knotted here, almost mated here, and even if no one could smell it anymore, the images were seared forever in Clarke’s mind.
It was melancholy to leave it all behind, but she wouldn’t let herself get wistful.

“This is just where we started again, Lexa,” she said, voice pitched low so the others across the fire room wouldn’t hear. “This isn’t where we end.”

Lexa smiled faintly, but it didn’t reach her eyes. She let the reeds fall shut and turned from the doorway. “It’s time.”

Felia and Nyko stood patiently behind the hut’s small fire pit, which had already been extinguished. Octavia was still huddled on a sleeping mat beside it, as if she hadn’t noticed it was no longer giving off heat. Clarke had expected to see her dressed and chomping at the bit, mate sickness be damned, and the lump of furs she found instead made her stomach drop.

“O?” she asked, getting closer. She crouched down beside her friend, one hand hovering tentatively over her shoulder. “Lexa and I have to go, okay?”

She half-hoped Octavia would roll over with angry eyes and demand to know why Clarke hadn’t woken her sooner, but she didn’t. The other omega didn’t move at all.

“She is resting, goufa,” Felia said gently. “Not to worry. We will care for her.”

Clarke straightened up, but worry was exactly what she felt. “Will she be okay? What about the baby?”

“I have helped omegas who have lost mates before, Wanheda,” said Nyko.

Her throat tightened. “That’s not an answer.”

“You have asked a question that doesn’t have one,” Lexa said quietly, stepping up beside Clarke. “Octavia could have no better caretakers than these.”

Lexa’s tone was sympathetic but composed, as if she felt for Clarke’s concern but remained unaffected herself—and yet there was a dark wisp of pain in her scent that hadn’t been there before. She couldn’t seem to make herself look at the small body curled beside the fire pit. She turned her eyes upward instead, and Clarke saw the moment when her gaze landed on the highest shelf, and the disintegrating sketch of Costia that held the place of honor there.

At first Lexa looked as though she’d been stung, but her expression slowly softened. She stared for a long moment in the flickering candlelight, as if speaking silent words to the fading face above.


Lexa cleared her throat, then looked to Felia. “Are they ready?”

As if in answer, a thin leaf fluttered down from the ceiling, seemingly out of nowhere.

Clarke craned her neck to peer up at the smoke escape in the center of the roof. Its rain cover had been removed, revealing the dark trees above the hut. The faces of Indra’s two warriors peeked into view, shadowed and silent as they hung in the branches.

They were Felia’s warriors, really—the ones Lexa had stationed here years ago to protect her after Costia’s death. They’d been recalled to Polis on the pretender Ontari’s orders, but Octavia had brought them back to Burou on Indra’s. There had been a heated argument between Felia and Lexa earlier that evening about whether the warriors would abandon their posts once again, but Felia had prevailed in the end. The two men would leave for Arkadia in secret with the Flamekeeper and the
future Heda, and Felia would remain under the stout protection of the village guards, who would stand sentry around the hut for as long as they believed Lexa was still hiding inside.

But that meant Lexa had to leave Burou undetected by those guards, and there was only a narrow window where that would be possible. The warriors’ faces hanging overhead meant it started now.

Clarke felt time pressing in on her, and she looked back to the splintered omega on the ground. This was exactly what she had wanted—for Octavia to stay behind in Burou and heal—but not like this. Not without a fight.

And yet she knew Lexa was right. If there was any chance of Octavia recovering from Lincoln’s death, it was with Felia and Nyko. Even if bringing her with them had been feasible, being trapped in the Medical Bay and hooked up to Ark machines would have broken Octavia’s spirit even faster than the mate sickness. If she was going to make it, it would be here in the world she had chosen. Here with Lincoln’s almost-brother, and a woman who had been to hell and back herself.

Nyko and Felia had worked miracles for Lexa not so long ago, and Clarke had to believe they could do it again.

One of the warriors up above made a *Tsss* sound. He widened his eyes meaningfully.

“Wait,” Clarke said. Their departure from Burou had become a reality, and it was happening too fast. She stepped haltingly toward Felia, though she still had no idea what she would say. What could she say? What words could ever do justice to what Felia and Nyko had given back to her? What thanks could ever be enough?

“Here,” was the clumsy word that finally tumbled out. Clarke took the rolled leather drawing from under her arm and held it out to Felia, red-faced and nervous. “There’s nothing I could ever do to thank you, but I could do this.”

The older woman cast a curious look at her, then at Lexa and Nyko. The beta healer was the only one who knew what Felia held, and he averted his eyes.

Clarke stood in quaking apprehension as Felia took the drawing from her clammy grip. The last time she’d been this fearful for someone to see her work was when Lexa had discovered the sketch of herself snoozing in Polis, and even that moment paled in comparison to this one.

Felia stroked the leather with an easy, uncomprehending smile, and for a second Clarke was afraid she thought the piece of hide was the gift. But then Felia leaned toward the nearest candle and began to unroll it so they all could see, inch by excruciating inch.

In the first roll, Felia’s smile vanished. In the next, her face lost its color. A third, and Clarke heard Lexa’s sharp intake of breath at her back.

By the time the drawing hung flat before them, a silent pall had fallen over the room. The only sign of life was Costia’s radiant face, beaming up at them from beyond.

The drawing was a copy of the sketch on Felia’s shelf, just larger and made permanent. It would never crack or crumble—at least not in Felia’s lifetime. She could hold it close instead of setting it out of harm’s way, and she could trace her daughter’s features every minute of every day without worry that the memory of her would ever fade.

But now that the moment of truth had come—now that Felia stood before her, ashen and trembling—Clarke didn’t know if she’d done the right thing. It had been presumptuous, certainly. Maybe even
insensitive and intrusive. She should have asked Felia first. She should have offered, not acted, and she should have—

Felia burst forward and engulfed her in a hug, crushing the doubts in Clarke’s heart with the force of her embrace. She squeezed and squeezed, and even when Clarke’s breath became short, she didn’t let go.

Clarke felt wetness on her cheek where their faces met.

“It’s meant to last,” Felia whispered, and Clarke knew she understood.

Felia finally stepped back, though she still held Clarke’s shoulders. Her dark skin was tracked with tears, but she was smiling, too.

“This is the best gift I have received, second only to the original.”

Clarke blushed, twining her hands together. “Well, Nyko helped.”

The healer had described to her the details of Costia’s face that were missing from the rudimentary market sketch—had told her when the nose curved too much, or the lips too little.

“We will call it even now, strikon,” Felia said.

Clarke gave her a watery smile. “No, we won’t.” She looked from Felia to Nyko. “If you ever need anything—either of you—anything…”

Nyko inclined his head. Felia let her go with a final squeeze, wiping at her eyes. “What we need now, I think, is for you to be on your way.”

Clarke nodded. She avoided Lexa’s eye as she stepped back, afraid to see her reaction to the gift. It was one thing for Felia to accept the drawing, but it was another thing for Lexa to know Clarke had spent all those days laboring over her dead love’s image.

But when their shoulders brushed in the small space, Lexa reached down and threaded their fingers together. Lexa squeezed so hard Clarke’s hand ached, but she loved every pulsing second of it. The tension slipped from her shoulders, and for the first time in a long time, the world felt somewhere on the way to right.

With her free hand, Lexa gripped Nyko’s arm and shook it. “Mochof,” she said. The word was quiet but full of meaning, and it made the tips of Nyko’s ears turn red.

Lexa offered her arm to Felia next. She was enveloped in a hug instead, Clarke’s drawing wedged between them. The former commander stood stiffly in the affectionate grasp, unused to physical contact outside the battlefield or the bedroom. No one touched Heda—but Lexa wasn’t Heda yet.

Felia whispered something in her ear, and Lexa’s posture eased. When she stepped back, a small smile tugged at her lips.

There was so much more to say, Clarke thought, but little else that could be put into words.

With the drawing still clutched to her breast, Felia bent to pick up the small rucksack she’d given to Clarke earlier that day. It was made of Old Earth nylon strung shut with reed rope, and after Clarke had packed it with her few belongings, Felia had whisked it back to the kitchen to stuff the remaining space with dried fish and fruits. Now she handed it to Clarke as a parting gift.
The Flame was safe in the pocket of her jacket, the one Titus had given her from the armor of the past commanders. She’d tried to give it to Lexa to wear instead, but the alpha had refused. Instead Lexa wore a long-sleeved shirt Felia had fitted her with and a pair of Octavia’s dark jeans, which she’d tucked into her boots to disguise their inadequate length. Those boots were the only garment Nyko hadn’t cut from Lexa’s body in the healer’s hut in Polis—and even they were stained dark with black blood.

“Take these,” Nyko said, stepping to the three-legged table at the side of the room.

He picked up a mass of crumpled fabric and fur. When he shook it out, Clarke saw he held two large overcoats. One was Nyko’s own, and the other must have belonged to one of the warriors outside. Both smelled strongly of beta. A beta’s scent was mild by definition, which meant Nyko and the warriors must have worked hard to drench the fabric in their pheromones.

“The scent will not last long, but it should help you out of the village.”

Clarke took one of the coats and slipped it on, ignoring how Lexa’s lip curled up in the ghost of a snarl. “He’s right,” she said firmly. “These will keep us from blowing our cover.”

A beta’s scent blended in easily with the natural world, but an unmated omega’s or alpha’s was harder to disguise—let alone an alpha as dominant as Lexa. An omega’s scent in particular changed during heat, and again after being knotted. Clarke’s heat had ended just hours ago, and the hints of it might still be detected by a sensitive nose. There were only so many omegas in Burou to start with, and it wouldn’t take a genius to deduce that the stray pheromones on the wind probably belonged to the Sky girl who’d gone into heat before the entire village.

With a dispassionate look, Lexa took the other offered coat. As she slung it over her shoulders, Clarke gained sympathy for her displeasure. Suddenly Lexa no longer smelled like hers, and to add insult to injury, she smelled like she’d been scent-marked by someone else. It took all of Clarke’s self-control to keep from unleashing a foolish wave of pheromones around Lexa, and she had to imagine Lexa was fighting a similar battle.

Clarke moved toward the fire pit instead, Lexa close at her side. She exchanged a final look with Felia and Nyko, hoping they could feel the enormous gratitude she couldn’t seem to voice.

“Well, off with you both, then,” Felia said, clearing her throat.

She blew out the candle on the table, then two more that sat on a shelf. The room was plunged into darkness, and all that remained visible was the dim circle of trees and sky overhead.

Lexa gripped Clarke’s hips, then covered her mouth in a hard, silent kiss. The alpha’s lips were gone before she could respond, and Clarke felt herself lifted from the ground toward the outstretched arms of the warriors above. Lexa, still injured, puffed beneath her weight. For a moment they tottered together below the smoke escape. Then Felia’s strong hands joined Lexa’s, and Clarke was handed up into the night.

They moved through the trees without speaking. The younger beta warrior went first, a sword strapped to his back. Lexa followed, then Clarke. The second warrior brought up the rear, a bow and quiver slung over his shoulder.
Down below, the village guard was changing. The villagers had organized themselves into two shifts, which Clarke suspected Felia had nudged into motion sometime during her heat. The rotation of the warriors was a slow, social affair. The newcomers delivered village gossip and steaming bowls of fishy-smelling soup, while the guards about to retire leaned in close to whisper about Heda inside the hut.

Clarke knew she had many valuable skills to offer the people of Earth, but climbing silently through trees was not yet one of them. To cover her inevitable fumbles, their traveling party moved only when their steps would be muffled. At every laugh down below, Lexa pointed at the next spot her quaking foot should land on. At every rush of wind through the leaves, Lexa tapped the next branch she should grab. As Clarke followed clumsily along, she tried not to notice that Lexa’s feet slipped on the damp bark nearly as often as her own.

It seemed to take hours, but eventually they reached the edge of the woods that surrounded the village. The beta warriors had lived in Burou protecting Felia for years before Ontari’s reign, and they knew exactly where to climb down from the trees to avoid the sentries at the village perimeter—and where Clarke’s crash landing on the forest floor would be stifled by the rush of the river nearby.

They’d also retrieved the confiscated horses Clarke and Octavia had borrowed in Tondc, under the guise of riding them back to Polis themselves. The mares were tied just inside the woods’ edge, munching lazily on grass in the moonlight. The betas took up positions on either side of the horses, pointing their weapons into the dark trees.

Lexa helped Clarke up from where she’d landed, though she looked like she was the one who could use a hand. Her mouth was drawn tighter than usual, and her breath came in short, tightly controlled spurts. Though she stood as tall and proud as ever, one of her fists was clenched. It hovered above her abdomen, as if it could frighten away the lingering knot of pain there. When she took a knee beside Clarke’s horse to help her onto it, she teetered for a split second before finding her balance.

Clarke’s chest clenched with guilt. The pheromones flying during her heat had made Lexa seem well for a little while, but she wasn’t. She was still the same woman who’d barely been able to stand just a few days ago, and their journey to Arkadia—and the Medical Bay—couldn’t have come soon enough.

“It’s okay, I can make it,” Clarke said, hoping to ease Lexa’s burden—and if she was being honest, some of her own guilt, too.

She gripped the saddle and hopped on one leg, attempting to wrangle her other foot into the stirrup. She had nearly managed it when she noticed Lexa’s gaze flick to the beta men. Lexa’s shoulders were tense, and an unfamiliar look crossed her face.

Belatedly, Clarke realized it was embarrassment.

Refusing her help had made Lexa look incapable—even redundant—in front of these warriors. At least, Lexa seemed to think so.

Clarke drew a heavy breath, letting her foot fall back to the ground. As much as this sort of alpha posturing made her want to roll her eyes, she knew she couldn’t have it both ways. She couldn’t ask Lexa to become the commander again, then coddle her in front of the people she would have to lead. And separate from any of that, she couldn’t bear to be the cause of the shamed look Lexa wore now.

“Wait,” she said, as Lexa began to awkwardly stand. “I… um, I can’t quite get it. Give me a hand?”

Lexa immediately sank back down, exhaling. “Of course.”
She cupped her hands to receive Clarke’s foot, and all Clarke could do was grab onto the pommel and try to lift her own weight as much as possible as Lexa hoisted her up into the saddle.

As Clarke settled on her horse, the older warrior spoke.

“You will ride, too, Heda.” He did not loosen his grip on his bow. “We will walk at your flanks.”

The former commander flexed her jaw. “Being alive does not make me Heda. Call me by my name.”

Lexa had agreed to do what was necessary in order to protect their people from nuclear disaster, even if that meant becoming Heda again, but Clarke knew she wouldn’t truly see herself as the commander until she had the Flame. She refused to simply declare her own sovereignty and wait for their people to fall in line, no matter how Clarke wished she would.

As Lexa turned to her own horse, the other beta came to untie Clarke’s mare and make a final saddle check.

“Here,” he said to Clarke, pulling a clump of canvas from somewhere under the torn layers of clothing he wore. He handed it to her, and she realized it was much more than a bundle of fabric.

Clarke unwrapped her gun with wavering hands. It was no less hateful an object to her now that Lexa was alive. But now that Lexa was alive, she needed it more than ever. She checked that it was still loaded, then tucked it under a saddle strap close to her right hand.

Lexa took hold of her own saddle, silhouetted by the reflection of moonlight from the river. Her gait was rigid with pain, and her shoulders were taut with suppressed coughs.

“Lexa,” Clarke called, as loudly as she dared in the quiet trees.

Lexa paused, one hand on her pommel. She turned concerned green eyes on Clarke.

Clarke licked her lips, scrambling for any reason to keep Lexa at her side. There had to be some way she could care for her, even within the confines of acceptable behavior for alphas—and for the future commander. Whatever she came up with couldn’t possibly be more damaging to Heda’s image than Lexa slumping over in a fit of pneumonia and toppling off her horse halfway to Arkadia.

“I… I don’t think I can ride alone.”

Lexa blinked. “Is something wrong with your mount?”

“No. I’m just… sore.” Clarke’s cheeks burned at the blatant reference to her heat in front of these strangers, but she forced herself to ignore it. Grounders didn’t blush and snicker at sex the way her own people did—and even if they had, protecting Lexa would be worth her own embarrassment. “I feel dizzy from the tea. I think I might fall.”

The beta warriors looked vaguely concerned, but they didn’t move to assist her. It was a Trikru alpha’s duty to protect her chosen omega, and Clarke knew it.

Lexa stared at her for a long beat, probing for the truth. Clarke watched as micro-emotions played out in her tired eyes—worry and guilt, then shrewd understanding of the ruse, then reluctant acceptance. As she handed her reins to one of the warriors and crossed back to Clarke’s side, Clarke thought she even saw a hint of gratitude on the alpha’s stoic face.

Lexa lay one hand on Clarke’s saddle, thumb brushing her thigh. Her voice was low and conflicted. “Clarke—“
Before Lexa could make some wise and reasoned argument about why they should ride separately, Clarke scooted forward on the horse to make room for her. As she readjusted, she realized there had been some truth in her lie. The flesh between her legs did feel tender and raw, and the thick leather saddle was unforgiving. She winced, and the last traces of reluctance vanished from Lexa’s face.

Lexa heaved herself up onto the horse. She settled in behind Clarke, her thighs around Clarke’s hips and her breasts pressed to Clarke’s back.

Clarke drew a sharp breath at the sudden nearness, only to feel disappointed when Lexa leaned away and began to wriggle in the saddle.

She craned her neck to see what was going on, but Lexa nudged at her hip.

“Up,” Lexa said softly.

Clarke stood in the stirrups, gripping the pommel for balance. A bundle of fur was placed on her seat, and Clarke realized Lexa had taken off her borrowed jacket and folded it into a cushion.

Lexa urged her back down, one hand splayed across her abdomen. “Better?”

Clarke gave a little sigh of relief. The padding did help, but not as much as the cloud of alpha that surrounded her. “Way better.”

The betas seemed unfazed by the new arrangement, and Clarke felt a twinge of victory. The younger warrior held the reins of Lexa’s riderless horse, sword in hand. The elder took up position on Clarke’s opposite side.

“We follow the river to the shallows, then across and into the woods,” he said, looking to Lexa. “If there is no trouble, we reach Skaikru by midday.”

As they made their way along the dark river, Lexa’s hands covered Clarke’s on the reins. But the more time that passed, the harder it was to say who was really steering. With every swaying step of the horse, Lexa let more of her weight rest against Clarke’s back. Clarke felt some of the tension fall from Lexa’s shoulders, and she suppressed a smile.

“Thank you, Clarke,” Lexa murmured into her shoulder. “And thank you for what you did for Felia.”

“Oh,” Clarke swallowed. “I didn’t really—I mean, it’s not—“ She bit her tongue, glad Lexa couldn’t see the heat in her cheeks. “It was the least I could do.”

When both warriors were looking off into the forest, Clarke felt Lexa press a kiss to the back of her neck.

“Lexa?” she said, after many more moments of silence. There was something she’d been wanting to know.

“Mm.”

“What does this mean?” Clarke made the gesture she had seen in villages across Trikru territory whenever she’d mentioned Costia. She pressed her fingertips to her forehead, then pointed them at the sky.

Lexa stiffened slightly. “It means I look for you in the stars. My people believe that when our bodies are burned, our souls rise up.” She spoke hesitantly, as if she knew Clarke and her Ark science
would not agree. “This is what lights the night sky.”

Clarke kept quiet, hoping she would continue.

“When the spirits are pleased with us, they reveal themselves,” Lexa said. “We see many stars, and good fortune comes to the villages. We have better harvests and victory in battle.”

Clarke suspected this was because clear skies meant good weather, and good weather meant longer growing seasons, easier travel, and better visibility. But she didn’t say so.

“Trikru do not speak the names of the dead they believe harbor ill will. Those whose deaths were not avenged,” Lexa said. “If they must, they make this gesture. They hope to appease the spirits and coax them to show themselves.”

At last Clarke understood why the villagers she’d met had seemed so spooked by Costia’s name. Even though the commander’s intended mate had eventually been avenged, Nia’s grisly end had come years late. The habit of reaching up to the sky must already have been ingrained by then. Or maybe the Trikru believed Costia hadn’t really found justice at all, so long as the Ice Nation still sat at the table of the Kongeda.

Clarke ached to think of how cruel this must have been for Lexa. In the darkest depths of her grief, she would have rarely heard Costia mentioned—and if she ever did, it would have been just another reminder that she’d failed her.

Faint wisps of pain wafted from Lexa, and it was obvious she knew whose unsettled spirit had brought on Clarke’s questions.

Clarke squeezed Lexa’s hands on the reins. She rubbed the hollows of her palms with her thumbs, releasing a swell of soothing omega pheromones into the night air.

“The sky was gray while you were gone,” she mused. “There were hardly any stars at all. But now…”

They peered up together, Lexa’s cheek brushing against Clarke’s hair. The waxing moon was hazy with wispy clouds, but the stars were brilliant. Hundreds and hundreds of them shone in the sky.

Clarke knew they only twinkled because of the refraction of light at the Earth’s atmosphere, just like her heart only beat because of electrical impulses in her cells. But in this moment, she couldn’t help but feel that Lexa was responsible for both.

Lexa pressed a final kiss to her shoulder. “Let us hope they bring us luck.”

The further they rode, the lower Lexa slumped in the saddle. Before the constellations had shifted in the sky, she was asleep against Clarke’s shoulder. She didn’t wake when owls hooted in the trees or when they reached the shallows and forded the river, not even when the toes of her boots skimmed the water.

If the warriors thought that needing to rest made Lexa unsuitable for command, Clarke thought with a huff, at least they didn’t let it show. In fact, each time the betas’ eyes flicked up, it was Clarke who drew their stares.
She kept her chin high, but she couldn’t help feeling self-conscious. Everyone in Burou, including these warriors, knew exactly what she and Lexa had been doing for the last three days. If they’d been unlucky enough to be stationed right outside the bedroom window, they might have even heard or smelled it for themselves.

On the Ark, an omega’s heat was reserved for married couples intending to conceive a child. If a baby was born, it would be the first and last heat the couple ever experienced. Outside of that context, mating cycles were just an Old Earth embarrassment to titter about behind cupped hands. Omegas were taught to feel glad that they would never succumb to their heats in such a degrading and animalistic way, and grateful that they would never be used by alphas like omegas had been in the olden days. But Clarke had never felt used by Lexa, and she definitely hadn’t felt degraded. Not until now, at least.

Lexa must have sensed her discomfort even in sleep, for she roused long enough to make a low, rumbling warning noise in her chest. It sounded more like a purr than a growl, but the warriors’ eyes snapped back to the forest all the same.

Clarke’s stomach turned. Was this how it would be now? People dismissing or deriding her until her alpha told them off? She had fought so hard to earn the respect of her own people and Lexa’s, and the thought of it all blowing away in a single heat made her throat tighten with the unfairness.

Once Lexa had relaxed into sleep once more, the younger beta’s boldness returned.

“How did you do it?” he whispered, glancing up at Clarke.

She couldn’t keep the croak out of her voice. “Do what?”

*Trigger your heat at the worst possible moment? Hurl all of Burou into an uproar? Trick the commander into knotting you?*

“How did you bring Heda back from the dead?”

“Oh.”

When Clarke finally looked down and met the man’s gaze, she saw there was no judgment or disdain on his face. He watched her with wonder, and maybe a little bit of fear.

“She wasn’t—” Clarke stopped herself midway through the denial.

Even though some called her *Fleimkepa* now, it seemed the Grounders’ faith in the power of Wanheda had not waned.

After all, no one but Felia had seen Nyko arrive in Burou with Lexa’s body. No one knew that he had toiled day and night for weeks to keep her breathing. To the rest of the village, and to these warriors who had come later, it must have seemed as if Clarke had galloped in from Polis with the Flame, and then suddenly, somehow, their commander was there and alive again. It must have seemed as if Lexa had really died and been resurrected.

Clarke had never wanted to be the commander of death, and she didn’t want to be now. But her mind raced with how she might turn the Grounders’ perceptions to Lexa’s advantage.

“I don’t know how she came back,” Clarke said.
That much was true. Nyko had explained the mechanics of all he’d done to treat Lexa, but who was she to say why it had worked? Was it Nightblood that helped Lexa survive? Divine intervention? Dumb luck?

The warrior frowned. “But you are Wan—”

“I don’t have that kind of power. I wish I did.” That was true, too. “If I could bring people back from the dead, I’d be doing it all the time. My dad would be here.” Wells. Charlotte. Lincoln.

The warrior seemed to see the logic in this. But the question on his face was plain: if Lexa hadn’t risen by the power of Wanheda, then how?

“I think…” Clarke wet her dry lips. Deep down, she realized, she did know why Nyko’s healing had worked. Why Lexa had returned to her when so many others had not. “I think it was her power that did it. Her strength.”

Clarke meant Lexa’s power, and Lexa’s strength. But she let the warriors hear Heda’s.

The betas exchanged uneasy glances. An owl screeched overhead.

“No commander has done this,” said the older warrior, walking on Clarke’s other side. He had skeptical eyes and skin pocked with dark scars.

Clarke shrugged. “She always told me the Spirit would choose the next commander wisely. I guess it found a way to get the one it wanted.”

The warriors spoke to one another in hushed Trigedasleng as they traveled on. They spoke of whether the Spirit raising a commander from the dead was possible, and what it all meant.

Clarke said nothing. She didn’t need them to believe what she’d implied—not yet, anyway. Maybe not ever. She just needed them to wonder. She just needed the myth of the commander to grow a little bit larger. A little bit more entwined with the woman asleep at her back.

She just needed Heda to start sounding like Lexa, instead of the other way around.

Chapter End Notes

*Goufa* - child

*Strikon* - little one

*Mochof* - thank you

*Kongeda* - Coalition

*Fleimkepa* - Flamekeeper

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